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FIRST JUNE NUMBER

Too Many Thieves

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Beginning

LETHAL LEGACY

By DOROTHY L. BONAR

Ranch Flicker Talk
Latest Western
Movie News

HUGH WILSON

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FIRST
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June 9, 1950
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RANCH ROMANCES

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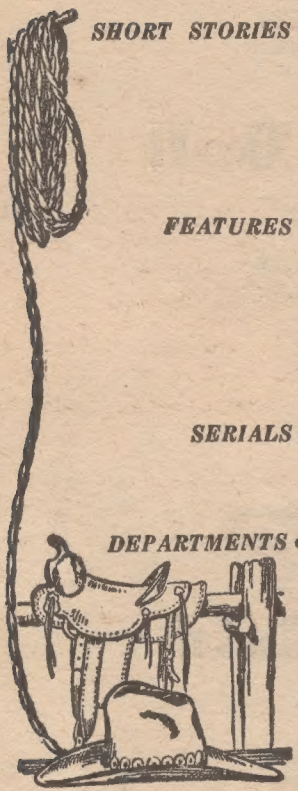

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TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

WHEN a snooty hotel in Bronxville, a suburb of New York, opened what it calls the Hereford House, cowman Pete Cowart of Texas chaperoned a Hereford bull calf by air all the way from Texas so the young fellow could make his debut at the opening. The calf, Bright Larry Domino III, was born and bred at the Boys' Ranch on the site of the old frontier town of Tascosa. He's a valuable critter and is the gift of—how'd you guess?—the people of the town of Hereford, Texas.

IN KANSAS CITY a construction worker fell nine floors with a building hoist, hit with such impact he landed 25 feet from the platform. And the only harm he suffered was some slightly strained muscles.

IN CLEBURNE, TEX., when a wife saw her husband attacked by an angry bull, she jumped into the family jaloppy and ran into the beast full tilt, scaring him off. . . . In Fort Worth, a man who left his lunch on a bus longs for the return of his false teeth, which were naturally wrapped with it.

IN DENVER, a student wrote to the Bureau of Reclamation for some public utilities information he needed for an exam —and was so harried he forgot to send his name and address. . . . In the same town, a driver running from a $30 speeding ticket managed to evade police—until he'd run up $2,045 in traffic offenses.

IN GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, Mont., four youngsters built a snow fort and then were waylaid by a moose who sent them into hasty retreat, retiring with all battle honors.

THERE'S a singing mouse down in Hobbs, N. M., but don't ask for proof of the fact. Like all true artists he's temperamental, and will yodel only for his owners.

IN SEATTLE, confident police are counting heads looking for the man who looted a haberdashery and made off with only one red wig.

THIS isn't the West, but we thought you'd like to know that in Ursa, Ill., an alert farmer captured and killed a slow-witted fox he found snoozing on his parlor sofa.

IN PHOENIX, ARIZ., it took the fire department three weeks to lure a frightened kitten out of a tree where he'd sought refuge from a tomcat. . . . And Flagstaff police nabbed a man who passed several forged checks—one to a company which sold him a check-writing machine.

IN LONG BEACH, Calif., while the owner of a New Hampshire red hen bragged that the hen had laid an egg weighing seven ounces, the exhausted hen lay down and died. . . . In neighboring Glendale, a man found lying on a street said he'd broken his leg. At the hospital they discovered it was only splintered—and a wooden leg.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

SMILEY BURNETTE

A WHOLE orchestra in himself and a guy who can make men laugh

Even Smiley's horse is hilarious

THE TOP Western comic is a big, genial guy named Smiley Burnette, and he's just about as entertaining to talk to as he is to see on the screen.

I was invited to meet him one afternoon recently at what was tea time for me but lunch time for him. He said, over a ham sandwich which didn't look as though it would go very far toward filling him up, that he'd been making personal appearances around New York all day and hadn't had time to eat.

He had had time, though, to make up a song while he was backstage at a theater in Brooklyn. He'd written both the music and lyrics, named it *Jackass Mail,* and had already made arrangements to record it.

Smiley is quite a hand at making up tunes and fitting words to them. About 350 of his songs have been published, and he's written so many others that he can't keep track of them. In *Trail of the Rustlers,* his latest movie with Charles Starrett, he sings three of them—*Shoot Me Dead for That One, I Should Say and I Wish I'd Said That.*

Music just comes naturally to him. He can play 52 musical instruments by ear.

"One time," he said, "when I could play only about 25, I decided I'd like to take up the marimba. I went to buy one, but I didn't have enough money, so I got a second-hand accordion instead. Well, I fooled around with it all afternoon, and in the morning I had it pretty good, so I used it on a fifteen-minute broadcast."

Smiley enjoys exhibiting his versatility. In one of his movies he played five instruments at once, and in another he used 25 in one song.

Doing everything at once is kind of a specialty of Smiley's. Besides making eight movies a year, he travels thousands of miles making personal appearances at theaters, rodeos and fairs, holds five union cards and has enough hobbies for ten people.

He's good at all his hobbies, too. If he ever gave up acting and song-writing, he could be a carpenter or a recording engineer, or maybe a press agent or a photographer. He's a qualified arc welder, plumber and painter, and he knows what to do

Smiley Burnette with one of his 52 musical instruments—Columbia Pictures

with a machine lathe, a ceramic kiln and a cement mixer (which he built himself).

And on top of all this he's a family man. His wife, Dallas, and he made a pact never to be separated for more than three weeks.

"If I can't get home from one of my tours after three weeks, she comes to me. A marital contract is like a theater contract, and you've got to work just as hard at one as the other."

The Burnettes have four adopted children —Linda, 11, Stephen, 9, Carolyn, 7, and their newest one, Brian, 4.

"We got him a year ago on Christmas morning," Smiley told me. "He'd said he wanted a mother and a daddy and a bicycle for Christmas. He got all three."

The Burnettes have an elaborate system of "Premiums" and "Treats" by which the chores get done and the children earn their good times. Every task well done is worth a specified number of Treats. When Carolyn has accumulated four, she can go riding. It also takes four for Brian to go on the merry-go-round.

The kids can also horde their Treats until they have enough to make a Premium. The figures got a little beyond me at that point, so I'm not sure how long one must save up to get a Gold Premium, but anyway when one of the youngsters has four of *them,* he can go with Daddy on location —which is the supreme reward.

It's no wonder that the prospect of going on location is so enticing. Smiley has his own trailer, and he's his own cook, turning out five-, six- and seven-course meals for anyone lucky enough to be invited.

Smiley's studio, Columbia, has the making of horse-operas down to a science. Each one takes eight days.

"There are no apprentices in our business," said Smiley. "You've got to know what you're doing."

He doesn't have a double, because no one could imitate his peculiar, loose-jointed gyrations all over the horse.

He's no rancher, not because he doesn't have time for it, but because he tried raising cattle once, to his sorrow.

"I never knew animals could get so many things wrong with them," he said. "When it got to the point where I had to keep a vet on the payroll full-time, I gave it up. Now we live in a house with only one acre of land. It's just as well, I guess. I'm just a bedroom slipper husband."

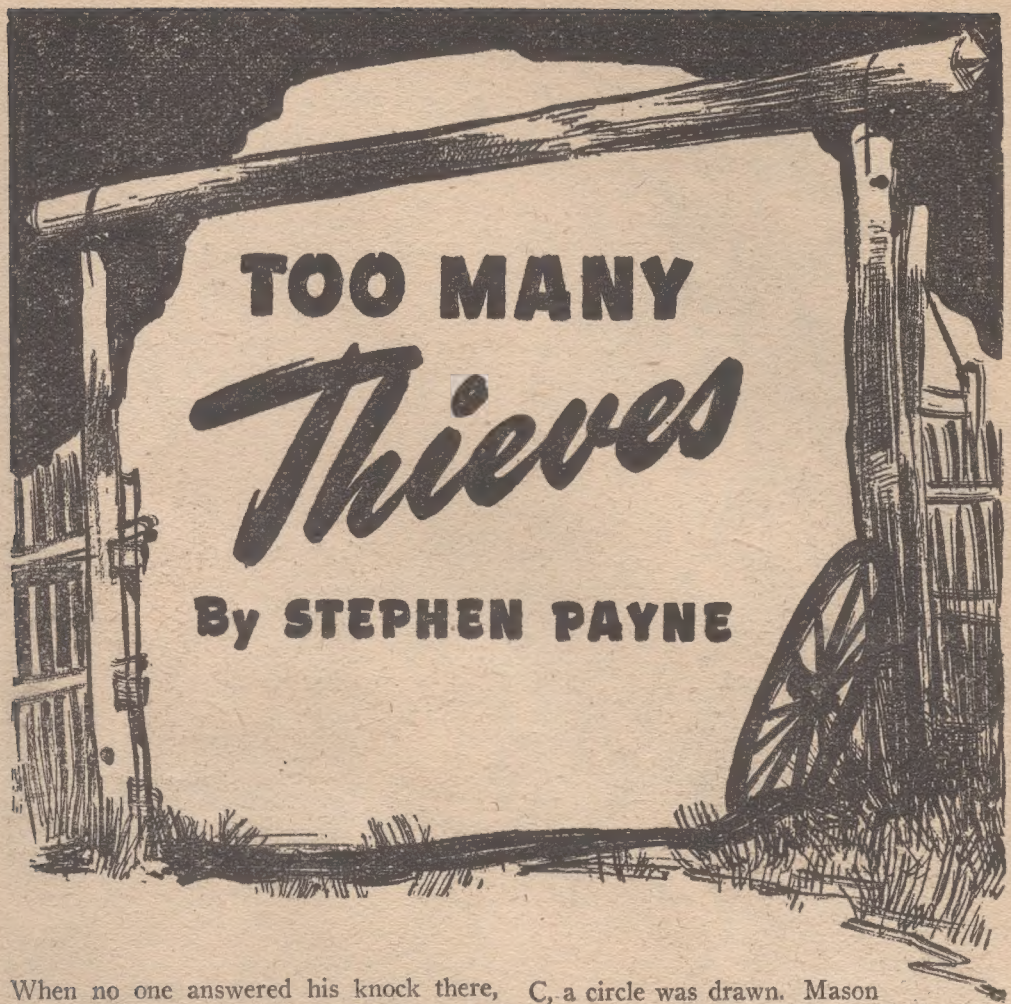
BETH BRIGHT

Turning, he saw the gun in her hand

ART MASON stepped off a freight train when it stopped for water in Grayhorse. Ragged and unshaven, he hid in the rank weeds and brush along the railroad right of way until darkness had come before he made his way up town.

Paused at an alley's mouth, he had his look at Stafford Raines' saloon and gambling hall, The Red Moose. He would have liked to size up Stafford Raines, about whom he had heard a great deal, some of it good, most of it entirely unfavorable. But Mason, whose lithe, active young body and lively blue eyes belied his uncurried appearance, could not risk being seen just yet.

For future reference he located the main hotel, the livery stable, and finally Sheriff Brad Tepley's office at the county jail.



TOO MANY *Thieves*

By STEPHEN PAYNE

When no one answered his knock there, Mason nodded with satisfaction. Tepley had told him that he'd make it a point to be out of town both tonight and tomorrow night. If necessary, Mason could send him a wire at Burnt Fork, fifty miles to the east.

As he hurried back toward the depot, Mason stopped in an alley where light poured through a window, to examine a penciled map of the locale. Landmarks, roads and streams were plainly marked and named, and around one ranch, the Rafter C, a circle was drawn. Mason reckoned he had his directions straight.

Under his tattered coat and vest was a gun in a shoulder holster. One pocket bulged with chocolate bars and raisins, to sustain him in case he were unable to get a meal for twenty-four hours or more. Wadded into another pocket was a pair of soft moccasins, and in another a wallet containing expense money.

The rumble of a westbound passenger train and its loud whistle made music in the

---

THE SHERIFF WAS BEHIND the roundup of a trio of robbers. But not far enough behind, as it turned out

night. Yet because this through train seldom stopped at Grayhorse, there was no one at the depot except the station agent, who showed his surprise when it ground to a halt. Mason, watching the agent, was relieved when he apparently did not see what Mason saw—a man alight from the rear coach. He was sure the passenger was Hubert Claymore, the man he was to shadow.

Claymore wore work-shoes and a dark suit. His Stetson, probably the same one he had owned when he'd been sentenced to the penitentiary, identified him as a ranchman.

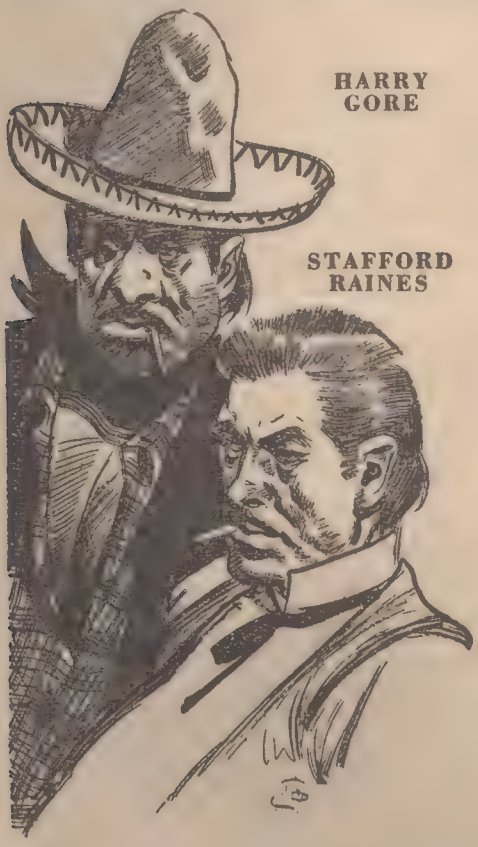
The agent had gone back into the station, and when no one else materialized Claymore flexed his arms, gazed up at the stars as if rejoicing in his freedom, and started walking.

MASON discarded his shoes, put on his moccasins, and trailed Claymore. So suspicious and wary was the man that every few minutes he would turn and stand motionless while he listened.

For four or five miles the two men moved southwest under the stars, across the rough hills of the vast and silent rangeland. Then quite abruptly, in rocky, pine-studded hills, Claymore turned sharply to the right. Luckily for Mason, he saw this move in

time and when the man seemed to vanish he surmised that Claymore had stepped behind a large boulder where he was waiting, listening, watching.

Except for the movement of his eyes, Mason was entirely still, scarcely breathing until he again saw Claymore. The man appeared from behind the boulder which had concealed him, and began running due north. He stopped at a huge pinnacle-like



rock and reached up above his head to a niche in the rock.

After fumbling a few minutes, Claymore drew something from the niche. Then he straightened and threw anxious glances around him. No sound broke the silence. He hesitated a moment, then he shoved the object back into the niche, and struck out at a fast pace, heading toward the Rafter C ranch.

Mason walked to the pinnacle, reached up into the niche, and pulled out a heavy package wrapped in an old slicker. Opening the package, Mason was sure that he felt both as excited and as furtive as Claymore had evidently felt. Inside the slicker was oilcloth, and folded inside of this were bundles of greenbacks and a canvas sack full of ten, twenty and fifty-dollar gold pieces!

Mason did not attempt to tally the cash, but he was now certain that the game he was playing as Sheriff Brad Tepley's assistant was working out in a very satisfactory manner.

Mason hadn't met Sheriff Tepley of Grayhorse until a week ago, when Tepley had come to the O Bar D ranch, ninety miles north of Grayhorse, purposely to see him.

"I'm here," the sheriff had explained, "because you got your name in the local papers last fall." A medium-sized, wiry man in his forties, Tepley had sharp grey eyes, a hooked nose and a small, tight mouth. He wore the clothes of a cowpuncher, and his precisely creased hat and his unusually small, fancy high-heeled boots testified to his vanity.

"You were one of the guides of a big game-hunting party of rich swells," he continued. "Far back in the mountains one of those fellows got lost and the newspaper said you found and followed the lost hunter's trail when everyone else was helpless."

Mason said, "I seem to have a natural bent for that sort of stuff. As a kid I was goofy about hunting and trapping and making believe I was an Indian. Even though I'm a cowpuncher now, I still get a big kick out of acting as guide to parties out for big game."

Tepley looked at him thoughtfully.

The sheriff of Grayhorse commented, "Well, I'd like you to take on a tough job, Mason. You hear about the robbery of Stafford Raines' Red Moose last summer, a year ago?"

Mason said he had heard that Stafford Raines himself was suspected of being a crook and a thief, and that a fellow called High Hat Harry Gore was teamed up with Raines.

TEPLEY nodded grimly. "There's never been enough proof to swear out a warrant for Stafford Raines. And in this case, his own saloon was robbed. Three masked men did the job about midnight, in a driving rain storm. Took forty thousand dollars in gold and greenbacks. They'd have made a clean getaway if someone hadn't seen their horses in front of the Red Moose and sounded an alarm.

"A dozen of us rushed after the bandits. There was some gunplay, but so far as I know it did no damage to either side. But in the excitement, Hubert Claymore's mask slipped and a vivid stroke of lightning showed his face so clear he was positively identified.

"The three legged it out of town. I organized a posse, but we lost all trace of 'em in the downpour, and we were unable to pick up their trail anywhere in the county. But we did nail Hubert Claymore at his Rafter C ranch. His horse had gone lame, and he was going to get a fresh mount. Or he may not have known he'd been recognized as one of the thieves.

"But Claymore didn't have any of the money, nor would he name the men who'd been with him. Harry Gore couldn't be found. If High Hat Harry was involved in other minor robberies with Stafford Raines, it looks like he doublecrossed Raines and helped Claymore pull this job.

"Claymore was convicted and sent to the pen. But I've pulled wires to have him released on parole, and he's due in Grayhorse next Monday night. Even his family doesn't know he's coming, for I don't want anyone to meet him at the depot. But I do want you to shadow that man from the minute he steps off the train."

Mason got in a sharp word. "Why, Sheriff?"

Tepley, squinting his chilly left eye, tapped Mason on his wide chest. "Between you and me, Mason, I did wring one admission out of that trap-mouthed cuss. He said neither Raines nor I would ever get that cash, because he was the only man who knew where it was."

"Savvy," said Mason, liking the promised excitement in this job. "Just suppose, though, that Claymore looks to see if the loot is where he hid it, and then puts it back?"

"In that case get the money and put it in another place that will be safe. Don't keep it on you, because you may find yourself in a bad spot, captured by these crooks. Then we'd lose the stuff again.

"After you've put it in a safe place, keep on shadowing Claymore. When you get a chance, slip back to Grayhorse and report to me. I'll be at Burnt Fork."

"Why at Burnt Fork?" Mason asked, surprised.

"I'm going to let Claymore know I'm in Burnt Fork so he'll be sure I'm not spying on him. If he suspected I was trying to shadow him, the whole thing would be useless. I've kept my visit to you a secret, Mason, and I expect you to keep the deal under your hat until it's all over. Are you on?"

Mason had said, "I'm on!"

NOW, PLACING the oil cloth and slicker wrapping back around the package of currency, Mason carried out Tepley's orders by seeking a new hiding place. Being careful to leave no footprints, he walked along a ridge until a big yellow pine caught his attention.

Mason shinnied up the tree, placed the bundle in its wide, deep crotch, dropped back to earth, and made sure the package was invisible from the ground. Then he struck out for the Rafter C ranch.

This was open range country, with pines scattered over the hills and willows clustering around springs in the many gulches. Quite soon, however, Mason came to a wider valley enclosed by a fence. A willow-bordered stream ran along it from west to east, and to the north stood a high butte. According to Tepley's map, this place must be the Rafter C.

In a nearby pasture Mason saw half a dozen horses and a few cows, and having located the buildings he was puzzled to find them completely dark. If Claymore had come home, his family would have raised a light to welcome him.

With worry gnawing him, he moved

slowly and stealthily past a corral, and a small log stable where a moment's listening told him a lone horse was stalled. Then he went on to a low, weathered log house.

For the first time, Mason felt strong distaste for his job. Trailing a man was one thing, but sneaking and spying was a feature he didn't like. Sheriff Tepley had told him Mrs. Claymore and her daughter Alice lived alone on the old place. They'd had a pretty tough time of it.

But when Mason had completed a circle around the house, he concluded that the place was unoccupied.

In a lean-to at its east end he noticed a well curb, and to quench his thirst, he started to draw a bucket of water. But suddenly he heard light, quick steps behind him. A feminine voice asked sharply, "Who's that? What are you doing here?"

IN THE moment of silence that followed, Mason turned and saw a girl. His first impression was that she was medium tall, slender, but sturdy. Her hair was like spun silver in the starlight, and she was amazingly pretty. He also saw the big six-shooter in her right hand, and he heard her say, "Well, did you find what you were looking for this time?"

"This time?" Mason repeated, astonished.

"Don't act innocent! Soon after Dad was arrested, men hiding behind masks constantly prowled this ranch. Lift your hands and step out where I can see you."

Mason hesitated, then with a shrug he obeyed.

"Face the wall, hands up," came a second command. She ran her left hand over his body and slipped his gun from its shoulder holster. Tossing the weapon up to the dirt roof, she said, "Step into the house ahead of me and light the lamp on the table. I want a good look at you, prowler, and I also want to talk to you. Got a match?"

Mason lighted the reading lamp on the dining room table. As he stepped back from it and faced the girl, penciled lines formed between her brows.

"Your clothes look like a hobo's," she said, "but you don't! This tramp get-up is a disguise. I've never seen you before, have I?"

Mason's eyes began to twinkle and grow warm. "I know I've never seen you before, lady."

"Who are you? Why'd you come here?"

Although Mason's eyes met hers in a disconcertingly frank manner, he shook his head stubbornly. Her temper flared, and she cried, "If three men were involved in the Red Moose robbery, why is my father supposed to have hidden the loot. It's obvious that you came here to try once more to find that cache, so you must have been involved. Were you?"

A tight smile moved Mason's lips. "No."

"Wouldn't you rather tell me the truth, than have Sheriff Tepley tear it out of you?" she demanded.

"Yes, Miss Claymore, I would. But even though you've got the whip hand, I'll drive a hard bargain."

"You're in no position to—"

"I hate to contradict a lady, but you won't get a word out of me unless you give me the lowdown on this situation. By the way, won't we awaken your mother and alarm her?"

"No," said Alice shortly. "Mother has taken a job in Grayhorse. She says that everything is sure to come out all right, as soon as my father is proved innocent. As if—" impatience crowding her voice—"any part of this could ever come out all right!"

"I have only the haziest idea about what happened here before the robbery of the Red Moose. Weren't there earlier hold-ups?" Mason asked.

"Yes, some small jobs," Alice replied. "Many folks, including my father and Tepley, credited them to Stafford Raines and his right-hand man, Harry Gore."

"Who was Harry Gore? What'd he do?"

"A six-footer, dark and good-looking," Alice supplied. "He could turn his hand to almost anything, but preferred to loaf around the Red Moose and gamble. Most of us think he pulled the minor robberies, and at least two other big jobs."

"Two big jobs?" Mason asked eagerly.

"Isn't it also believed that Gore double-crossed Stafford Raines, and was one of the three men who robbed the Red Moose?"

"Yes," said Alice. "But Dad never admitted anything, not even on the promise of leniency if he would name his accomplices . . . Are you the third man?"

"No. Think back, Alice. Did any one of your neighbors have strong reason for wanting to rob Stafford Raines?"

"Jim Maxwell lost far more money than he could afford, gambling at the Red Moose. His losses almost broke him and made him hate Stafford Raines.

"Another of our neighbors, Andy Dorn, sold off his herd of cattle and was coming home, when two masked men held him up, slugged him unconscious and robbed him of six thousand dollars.

"The next robbery hits right home. My own father borrowed nine thousand dollars from Stafford Raines on his personal note, intending to buy cattle with the money. But—" Alice stopped.

LEANING forward, Mason prompted, "And on his way home your father was held up?"

"A rope dropped on him from behind and he was yanked off his horse. He caught a brief glance of two masked men before one slugged him with the barrel of a Colt. There was no evidence as to who these bandits were—except a glove belonging to Stafford Raines."

"Raines squirmed out of that?"

"Oh, yes," she said wearily. "He declared the glove had been stolen, and he proved an alibi."

"When was this, Alice?"

"Eighteen months ago, in March. Dad thought Stafford Raines let him have the money only to rob him of it and have him at Raines' mercy. So you see he had a motive to rob the Red Moose. Nobody could blame him."

"I hear somebody coming," Mason interrupted. "It's a man, walking fast."

Springing up from her chair, Alice backed to the open door, through which streamed a funnel of lamplight, and threw a quick glance out into the night. A tall man wearing a familiar hat entered the light lane and came straight on toward her.

"Alice!" he cried. "Alice, my girl."

"Dad!" Alice forgot her captive as she

He led the party to the yellow pine on the ridge

rushed forward to meet her father. She flung herself into his arms and snuggled her blonde head against his shoulder. "Dad! You're home, and I'm so happy."

Art Mason left the house by its back door. Now that Alice Claymore had clarified the knotty situation, his full sympathy went out to Hubert Claymore.

Tonight Mason had seen the man take a look at the loot and then replace it. After that he had not come straight home. He had obviously gone to see someone. He had two close neighbors, Andy Dorn and Jim Maxwell, supposed to be square-shooters. Yet both men had had reasons almost equal to Claymore's for robbing Stafford Raines!

Suddenly Mason saw two figures were stealing across the yard from the stable to the house. At the lean-to they vanished.

Silently, Mason crept across open ground, stopped twenty feet short of the dwelling, and discovered by the lights and sounds that Claymore and Alice were in the kitchen. Apparently the two skulking men were listening in on the Claymores' conversation.

Mason reached to his shoulder holster and when his hand came away empty, he experienced a chilly sensation. Until this moment he had forgotten that Alice had disarmed him.

MOTIONLESS against the earth, he waited. Then the kitchen door was thrown open, and as the funnel of lamplight poured through the opening two men leaped into the room. Mason saw a tall fellow dressed more like a movie cowboy than a range hand, and a stocky man whose shoulders, neck and head reminded him of an Angus bull.

Both men flourished six-shooters, and the rangy one said, "Sit tight, Claymore. You too, Alice."

"Harry!" ejaculated Claymore.

Shifting to get a better look into the kitchen, Mason saw a table in the center of the room, Claymore seated at one end of it. Alice stood at his left, facing the door and holding a coffee pot.

"Well," said Harry Gore. "Sheriff Tepley tried to keep it secret when you'd be released. But I got word of it by the

grapevine—a little too late to be on the job as soon as I'd have liked."

"What do you want?" Alice demanded.

"Take it easy, girl," returned Gore. "If you start anything, either I'll put a bullet through your dad, or my pal will take care of it. Let me introduce Bull Walton. I'm kinda easy myself, so I roped in a fellow who's not too soft to make you do what we want, Claymore!"

Claymore was silent.

"Keep 'em covered, Bull," said Gore. He holstered his gun, cuffed his low-crowned black hat back on his dark head, and went on. "Forty thousand dollars is a lot of dough. My theory is that when the three thieves hightailed out of Grayhorse, Claymore was carrying the money. In the storm he got separated from the others, hid the stuff, and was arrested so quickly he could not tell them where it was."

Mason could see Claymore's lined face tighten, his eyes turn bleak and stare straight ahead.

Alice was speaking. "So, you've come to grab the money. Well, you'll never get it."

"Wrong!" snapped the tall bandit with a sudden change of tone. "We got here in time to overhear Hu Claymore telling you that he would turn over the cash either to Raines or Tepley tomorrow."

Claymore spoke, "Gore, I had lots of time to think while I was in the rockhouse. I decided to do the square thing as nearly as I could. This way I hope something may be worked out so they'll let me stay at home and begin over again . . . Now, you fellows, let me do the square thing. Fade out, and we won't report that you were here."

GORE snapped his fingers derisively. "Alice," he commanded, "put that coffee pot on the table and sit down on the table, facing me and Bull."

Knowing her spirit, Mason was surprised when the girl obeyed at once.

"The loot, Hu," said Gore significantly. "Fork it over, and me and Bull will ride out as quietly as we came."

Claymore lifted himself to his feet, hands still on the table. "Damn you, Gore, I know you're one of the two men who robbed me of the nine thousand bucks Stafford Raines loaned me. You and Stafford Raines robbed me!"

"I'm waiting for the forty thousand."

"You won't get it."

"Alice, did he bring it home with him?"

"No."

"I kinda think you're telling the truth, Alice. But your dad knows where it is. Bull, you take charge of Alice while Claymore and I get the money. Oh, no, you don't, girl!"

But Alice had darted toward the living room door. Gore, moving fast, caught her.

As they struggled, Art Mason's moccasin-clad feet carried him into the room. His hands closed on the back of a chair. He swung it up, then crashed it on Bull Walton's head and shoulders. The force of the impact splintered the rungs, but failed to knock down the bandit. Dropping the chair, Mason closed with Bull, left hand clamping the man's gun wrist. Fighting with fury, Mason put the big fellow on his back and twisted the Colt from his hand.

Alice had tried to hold Gore back. But he had shoved her into a corner, and was snaking his gun from its holster. Claymore, apparently too astounded to act, had so far done nothing.

Bringing the Colt which he had wrested from Bull Walton to bear on Gore, Mason snapped, "Up, or I'll kill you!"

Gore lifted his hands. Mason threw a glance at Bull. "Lie still, or you'll get it, too."

Bull relaxed, and Mason backed toward the door in order to watch both men. "Step behind High Hat and get his gun, Claymore," he shouted.

But before Claymore could act, a squeaky voice directly behind Mason commanded, "Get 'em up!"

Mason felt the muzzle of a gun against his left shoulder blade. No sense in committing suicide. He lifted his arms.

Claymore had already done the same, and Gore yelled approval: "Good work, Sam!"

THE STARS were beginning to fade, and a cloudless sky held promise of a clear day, when a party of men and one woman approached the pinnacle rock in the rough and wooded hills east of the Rafter C. Hubert Claymore was leading High Hat Harry Gore and his two men to the spot where he had hidden the Red Moose robbery loot.

Gore had brought both Mason and Alice along as captives, and although Claymore had not been bound, their hands were tied behind their backs. Gore and his men were mounted. The captives were not.

"There it is—Pinnacle Rock," growled Claymore. "The stuff's in a niche as high up as a man can reach, on the south side of it."

"Get it!" commanded Gore, his voice taut with excitement.

In the strengthening light, Mason saw the fellow's eyes glitter with anticipation and greed. His gaze went to Alice. Her expression was one of defiance.

The party formed a semi-circle about Claymore as he reached up and pushed his hand into the niche. An instant later he broke the tension with, "It's empty!"

Gore thrust Claymore aside. "If you've tried to doublecross me—" He too reached into the hole, but his hand came away empty. He lighted a match and lifted the flame up above his head to scrutinize the recess.

"You can see where the bundle was," Claymore said in a high and frightened tone. "Honest, Harry, I'm talking straight when I tell you I came by here when I was walking out from Grayhorse. The swag was there then, and I put it back where I'd found it."

"Says you!" muttered Sam.

Gore's left hand gripped the front of Claymore's shirt, his right whipped back as if to strike him in the face. "Stop puttin' on an act, Hu. Where's the dough? I'll give you three seconds to tell me."

"Can't you see that somebody else must have grabbed it?" Claymore replied hoarsely. "I'd have sworn I wasn't being followed. But somebody did follow me, and got it."

After a moment Gore said, "If that's the truth, the thief probably left some sign. I'll scout."

To Mason's dismay, Harry Gore did find a sign that caused him to crouch and examine it closely.

When he straightened up and returned to the group there was a wicked glitter in his dark eyes as they focused on Mason. He said slowly, "Look at them moccasins, men. This son wouldn't tell us nothin'—but he lunged in on Claymore's side."

"Get to the point, Harry," cried Sam in his high voice. "Night's about gone. We got to be huntin' cover."

"It's more'n likely this cuss was one of the thieves who helped Claymore rob the Red Moose," Gore announced. "That accounts for the tie-up between him and Claymore."

BULL urged Mason to the spot among the pines where Gore had been scrutinizing the ground. Gore was ahead, the others following. All of them saw the imprint of a moccasin-shod foot in a sandy spot bare of pine needles and twigs.

"That proves you were here," said Gore. "Now lead us to the swag—or do you want me to tell Bull Walton to put Alice Claymore on his horse and head elsewhere?"

"You win," Mason gritted.

He led the party to the yellow pine on the ridge, pointed to a crotch high up in the tree and said, "You can't see it from the ground, but the bundle is up there."

Gore ordered Sam to climb the big tree, which he did like a squirrel until he was perching on the limb jutting out at the point Mason had indicated. All at once his voice, more shrill than ever with excitement, came down to the others. "Ain't nothin' here!"

Mason doubted that he could have been mistaken in the tree. The sun had now lifted its rim above the eastern horizon, and objects do look different in daylight from the way they do at night. But he was not mistaken. This was the yellow pine where he had placed the bundle!

Claymore and Alice were motionless,

staring like Mason. Bull Walton seemed rooted to the ground, his big hands clenched, knuckles white. Gore faced Mason and said through white lips, "So you figured to trick me."

It occurred to Mason then to scrutinize the ground. "Keep your shirt on, Gore! Somebody beat you to it. Look at those tracks. Marks of a jigger who wore whopping big shoes."

Someone had been spying on Mason last night. The footprints proved it. His thoughts raced. Sheriff Tepley had told him that Claymore's release was a secret. Yet Gore and his men had heard of it. Someone else could have known it, too.

"Big shoes is right," Gore snapped. "And you were wearin moccasins. Maybe you shoved your feet, moccasins and all, into them shoes. Could be you left these marks."

"No," contradicted Mason. "If you can't find them for yourself, Gore, I'll point out my moccasin tracks. See this faint impression?"

"Well, it's a moccasin print."

"Here, and here, and here," said Mason, moving forward. "See where I went toward the Rafter C ranch?"

"Yep. Both your moccasin tracks and the shoe marks are plain. Seems like some skunk did outsmart you!" Gore squinted hard at Mason. "Where have I seen you? Now I've got it! Last fall, your picture was in the local paper, published at Craghead. Ain't I right, Sam?"

Sam's beady eyes raked Mason's face. He nodded agreement. "He's the gink who saved a lost hunter's life."

"What was his name?"

"Name?" said Sam. "Mason. Art Mason. Works for a big cow outfit and takes jobs on the side guidin' huntin' parties. How in hell 'd he get in on this, Harry?"

Gore hunched his shoulders. "How did you, Mason?"

When Mason refused to answer, the bandit spat out, "Stafford Raines! I'll bet my share of the loot Raines hired you." Gore's vehemence sounded as if he hated Raines. But rumors had it that Raines and High Hat Harry Gore had once been hand in glove.

Bull grumbled, "We're wastin' time, boss."

"Yes," agreed Gore. "Maybe the son who wore the big shoes was workin' with Mason, maybe not. But we're going to track down that cuss."

"Why not let the Claymores go home, Gore?" asked Mason.

Although tired and haggard, excitement and anticipation were now buoying Alice up, for she called out, "Never mind about me. I can stand it. I want to learn who has that money!"

AFTER leaving the yellow pine, Big Shoes had walked east across the hilly, sparsely-timbered country, leaving plain footprints for approximately a quarter of a mile. Then the prints petered out abruptly and, it seemed, completely.

Gore, keeping pace with Mason, snapped the order, "Do your stuff, tracker. I'm stumped."

Mason scouted a few moments and reported, "He sacked his feet with light canvas, turned due south, and he was in a terrific hurry, too."

Gore and Bull scrutinized the ground and muttered that they'd be damned if they could see a sign of Big Shoes' trail. Sam had been delegated to ride the high points as a lookout, keeping the party in sight so he could warn his pals of any threatened danger.

"I hope you're right," Gore said. "Follow the marks, if you can."

Mason followed the faint tracks without great difficulty, except in places where grazing cattle had obliterated the trail. Certain of the direction the fugitive was taking, Mason kept straight ahead and soon found the impressions once again. In less than a mile they led to Rock Creek, a sizable stream flowing east. Here, behind scrubby willows, a horse had been tied and left standing for three or four hours.

After scouting on both sides of the creek, Mason reported, "The jigger rode in the stream, either up or down the creek, to get to this spot, and then went on afoot. When

Her hand closed around Sam's neck, and she toppled him over backwards. His gun roared, the bullet leaping toward the sky

he returned, he mounted and again took to the stream.

"And it looks as if he knew Claymore would be walking toward his ranch from Grayhorse. Presumably the man walked out from this spot to intercept Claymore, sighted him and me, rode close herd on us, saw what I did with the bundle, and got away with it!"

"I know Rock Creek runs into Grayhorse River," said Gore, pointing east, "and the river goes through the town. He could have followed the creek to the river and gone on to Grayhorse, leaving no trail. Or he could have turned upstream along the river."

"It'll take forever to run down his trail now," Mason returned. "But I mean to follow this creek both up and down, and then along the river, to find out where he left the water and took to dry ground."

However, he felt pleased the way things were going. Surely Gore would now give up his hunt for the cash, let Alice and her father go, and ride out. Afterward, it would be up to Sheriff Tepley—and Mason, if he were still alive—to find the thief.

BULL WALTON broke his long silence. "I guess I'm stupid, Harry, yet we got only Mason's word that he put the loot up in the yellow pine. I figure he just handed it to the guy who wore them big shoes. They had it all arranged."

"I'm miles ahead of you, Bull," returned Gore. "I'm trying to figure every angle."

"If I'm right," Bull persisted, "Mason can tell us who the big guy is."

Gore made an impatient gesture. "Since you're doing some deep thinking, Bull, why did Mason hang around the Rafter C after he'd handed over the money to another man?"

The burly fellow grunted, "Well, why *did* he hang around Rafter C?"

"Because he's working for Stafford Raines." Gore stared at Mason, hoping Mason's expression would betray the truth. "Raines was the man who wore the big shoes! After Raines got the dough, Mason rode herd on the Rafter C to find out, if he could, who the other two men were who'd helped Claymore rob the Red Moose. Stafford Raines'd like to nail that pair, so that's the answer."

"You're smart, Harry," said Bull admiringly.

Gore signalled to Sam, who was visible on a neighboring hill, to rejoin the party. To Bull Walton, he said, "You find out if the horseman went upstream. There are sure to be brush-clogged spots, narrow places, little waterfalls, where a man afoot or on a horse can't stay in the channel. The first of those places you come to will tell the story."

As Bull started out, Sam arrived. "Nobody in sight to bother us," he reported. "Stumped?"

"We ain't licked yet," said Gore. "Wait till Bull gets back and I'll tell you what I've doped out."

Bull soon returned, and said, "I seen a place where no man or horse could get along right in the channel. But there ain't no tracks on either bank."

"So Big Shoes didn't ride upstream?" mused Gore. "I kinda figured he could have been one of Claymore's neighbors. By following up along this stream the neighbor would eventually get to his home."

Mason was watching Claymore, and saw by a flick of the man's eyelashes that Claymore had had the same idea.

Gore went on. "But that theory's exploded, and I'm convinced that Big Shoes was Stafford Raines. He's got the stuff. Our job's to get it from him."

Sam waggled his head. "Better prove your theory, Harry, before we risk our necks in a town holdup," he said. "I ain't known in this neck of the woods, so I can go to Grayhorse and fish for the dope we want."

"That's a good idea," Gore announced. "But first give us a hand in locking up these captives. Half a mile down along this creek there's an abandoned cabin that I think'll hold 'em . . . You can eat in town, Sam. Me and Bull'll swipe some grub at the Rafter C. All right, Hu, Alice, Mason, get moving."

They all started forward.

THE CABIN was in surprisingly good repair. Windows were boarded up to prevent range stock from breaking them, and the door was fitted on the outside with a strong wooden bar.

Bull pried off the bar and opened the door. Harry Gore had a look and remarked with satisfaction, "Nothing in there but two benches, a bunk, a table and an old stove. Get in, you three."

Mason voiced a protest. "We'll starve unless somebody finds us."

"After the way you've whipsawed us, Mason, I'd like to see you gnawing your moccasins."

Alice and Claymore walked into the dark cabin. Bull and Gore thrust Mason in after them and closed the door. Mason heard them fastening the bar across it and whispered to Claymore, "Untie me, quick."

To his astonishment the man ripped out savagely, "You're to blame for getting me and Alice in this damnable mess, Mason."

He untied his daughter's hands, and then, seating himself beside her on the bunk, he began awkwardly to chafe her wrists. "Alice, now I don't know what to do. I've been paroled, but my sentence still hangs over me. I wanted to return that stuff to Raines. Then my term would be reduced, or I might even get a full pardon. But now—"

Alice patted his cheek. "Oh, Dad," she said, sympathetically, "you couldn't foresee that High Hat Harry Gore would come into it."

"Mason had already stolen the money. Even if Gore hadn't shown up, he'd have upset everything for me."

"I'll admit," Mason remarked, "that the sheriff of Grayhorse would be tickled pink to nail me. I've gotten in his hair before this. If we do get out of this, don't take me to him, Claymore." Mason had an idea Gore was listening closely to their talk.

Alice jumped up and moved about the cabin, peering out through cracks in each wall. "Both Bull and Sam are gone," she reported, stopping near Mason. "Gore is staking out his horse to graze. Stand up. I'll untie your hands."

Obeying, Mason said, "Then you do trust me?" It was foolish of him to like her so much, to want to be her friend.

"No," she returned. "You're a spy and a thief. But Dad and I have to depend on you for whatever help you can give us. But I hate you, because you robbed Dad of the only chance he had to square himself."

"That changed the minute High Hat Harry Gore showed up, Alice."

"Well, let's not argue about that. Do something! If only we could escape while Gore's alone."

THE CORD off Mason's wrists, he flexed his numbed arms, rubbed his hands together. "We could batter loose the boards over one of the windows with a bench. But the racket might bring Gore with his gun. Same if we work on the door." He inspected the roof critically. "Heavy boards nailed down solid and covered with dirt. To get one board loose would take a lot of hammering and prying. Maybe we can tunnel out!"

He picked a spot at the north wall of the cabin, and cautiously pried loose a floorboard with a piece of metal wrested from the stove.

"Can't say I'll be sorry if Raines gets snuffed out," Claymore said bitterly. "I once thought he was pretty decent, in spite of the rumors about him. He seemed to be my friend when he loaned me that nine thousand dollars which would have put me on my feet. But I'm convinced he and Harry Gore stuck me up and robbed me of that money."

Alice let her breath out with a sigh, but said nothing. She was helping Mason, her nearness sending a heady sensation through him. He said over his shoulder, "As I see it, Claymore, it's important to save Raines' life. He can help you more than anybody else."

"I get your meaning," Claymore returned sourly, "but he won't! He's a thief."

"But not as cold-blooded as Sheriff Tepley," said Alice, looking again to see what Gore might be doing. "Bull's come back with some grub, from the Rafter C, I suppose. It doesn't look as if he and Harry are going to feed us or give us a drink. You

were thirsty last night, Mason. Still thirsty?"

"So dry I have to prime myself to speak," he returned with a forced chuckle.

"And you can laugh about it. You're a strange fellow."

DIGGING under the wall was hard, slow, and painful—nor was it probable that the work would really accomplish much. Claymore, positive the scheme was no good, stretched out on the bunk and went to sleep.

"Better do the same, Alice," Mason advised gently.

"If you can work, so can I. Do you suppose Sam did go to Grayhorse?"

Mason wiped sweat from his face with a grimy hand. "Sure. I hope we'll hear what he has to report when he comes back. Dig carefully. We'll try to leave a crust of earth to cover our tunnel, until the time's right to jar it loose."

He had made the tunnel large enough to accommodate a man's body, when about twilight Sam returned. Gore and Bull met Sam on the north side of the cabin, the side from which Alice, Claymore and Mason must escape. Neither Alice nor Mason could hear what the three men were saying. Soon, however, Gore strode around to the door of the shack.

He shouted, "Hey, Mason, Claymore, it's like we figured. Sam did a good job of scouting. Took a train to Burnt Fork, made sure Tepley was there, and came back to Grayhorse on another train."

As the bandit paused, Mason thought, "So Tepley's in Burnt Fork! Darn his hide, he left this whole thing up to me!"

Now in a low aside to Claymore, Mason said, "Quick, change clothes with me."

"Why?" asked Claymore.

"They haven't once tied you. They think you're harmless. If we can fool 'em, maybe I can turn the tables."

"No," refused the rancher flatly. "Bull's itching to kill you. But I want to stay alive, if I can."

"Change with him, Dad," pleaded Alice under her breath. "It may be our only hope."

"Well, if you ask it, Alice, all right."

Meanwhile Gore had been going on, "I sure wanted to know where that lawdog was. His being gone simplifies our job in Grayhorse."

"You've a job in Grayhorse?" shouted Mason.

"You bet we have," called Gore. "Might as well let you know Stafford Raines has an alibi up until three o'clock of last night, gambling with three or four men. Those birds'll lie for him, but I'd told Sam where to find Raines' saddle horse in town."

"What about his horse?" Mason called as he put his feet into Claymore's shoes and laced them up.

"That horse had been ridden hard last night, and showed plenty of evidence of having been in water up to its neck! Saddle blanket was sweat soaked, and the stirrups on Raines' saddle were still wet today."

Alice stepped across the cabin, peered through a crack, came back and whispered,

Claymore stopped, listening

"Bull and Sam are still there on the north side. It's not yet full dark, and they'll stop us if we use the tunnel."

However, Gore shouted, "Hey, men! Come around here. We'll let out the prisoners and take 'em with us. If we left 'em here they'd get out, or somebody'd find 'em. Either way'd mean tough luck for us."

Mason heard Squeaky and Bull join their boss. Pointing to the hole he'd dug, he

ordered under his breath. "You go first, Claymore, and break loose that crust of earth."

Claymore hurried silently across the cabin and ducked down. Alice hesitated, her hand on Mason's arm. "What'll you do?"

"Fight," he whispered. "Get out while you can!"

ALICE followed her father, vanishing just as the door swung open. Gore, Sam, and Bull Walton, with his six-shooter in his hand, filled the doorway, standing shoulder to shoulder. It was so much darker inside the cabin than outside that they could not immediately see that the room was empty except for Mason.

Eager to give the Claymores every possible chance, Mason stepped forward so the men might see him. Claymore's soiled hat was pulled low, shading his face, and he fervently hoped that the rancher's coat, pants and shoes would further the bandits' illusion that they were seeing Hubert Claymore.

Apparently the ruse was working, for Gore asked, "Where's Mason?"

"What's that noise?" Sam shrilled, as he heard dirt rattling down into the small tunnel.

"Pack rat," said Mason instantly, imitating as best he could Claymore's voice.

"Came from behind the shack!" shouted Sam. He whirled and began running. At the same instant Bull turned, and Mason pounced.

Bull was the most dangerous of the trio. Mason's right hand swept up and down, the piece of stove metal crashing onto Bull's skull. The fellow staggered but did not fall. Mason dropped the weapon, caught Bull's shoulders, rammed one knee into his stomach. Bull doubled forward, the wind knocked out of him, the Colt dropping from his hand.

"Quit it, Claymore, you old fool!" yelled Gore, and leaped upon Mason's back.

With the agility of a mustang Mason lashed out with one foot, in Claymore's heavy shoe, and caught Bull under the chin. Bull went down, and Mason hurled himself back against the cabin wall, ramming Gore against the logs. A wild yell came out of Gore. His grip on Mason fell away, and Mason leaped clear. Facing Gore, he landed four killing punches before Gore could straighten up or draw his gun. Gore slid down to the earth in a heap.

With Sam in mind, Mason turned again. The flash of a Colt gave answer to his wonder as Sam, crouched several yards away, fired, the bullet fanning Mason's left cheek.

Dazed and badly shaken, Bull was stirring, and Mason was still weaponless. Then, in the second before Sam could fire a second time, Alice Claymore materialized behind him. Her hands closed around Sam's neck, and she toppled the man over backwards. His gun roared, the bullet leaping toward the sky, and then Claymore arrived and threw himself upon the fellow.

Mason saw that as he lunged at Bull Walton and hit him, again felling him. Gore was getting up, but Mason caught him by his belt and the nape of his neck, lifted him up over his head, and brought him crashing down on top of Bull.

Ten minutes later the three renegades had been securely tied, and Claymore was looking at Mason with a new and marked respect. "What'll we do now?" he asked.

"First we'll go to your ranch," Mason announced, "where we'll all get a badly needed meal. Then we'll jail these jiggers in Grayhorse."

EXCEPT for a light at the depot and a scattering of odd lights in the residential section, Grayhorse was dark when Mason, Claymore and Alice reached the outskirts of the town. Except for the puffing of a switch engine in the railroad yards, and the sound of a train rumbling away into the night, the town was silent, too.

It had taken a couple of hours to do the chores and get a meal at the Rafter C. Following their ordeal, all three had washed and put on fresh clothing. Mason had shaved, and he was now wearing his moccasins, overalls and a hat discarded by some hired hand.

During this interlude the three disgruntled captives had been snubbed to corral posts, for Mason was taking no chances on their breaking away. Mason had wrangled mounts for Claymore, Alice and himself. But he had purposely delayed starting for town. The less publicity he got putting those fellows in jail, the better he'd like it.

Now, with all six of the party mounted, they avoided the main street and rode directly to the jail.

Claymore suppressed a shudder as they halted. "I hate that place," he muttered.

Mason swung off, and finding the door locked, pried up a window and crawled inside. He drew the shades in the office, raised a light, and located the sheriff's keys. Opening off the office was a narrow corridor with a cell on either side. Mason unlocked them before he opened the outer door and, assisted by Claymore and Alice, pushed Harry Gore into one cell, Bull Walton and Squeaky Sam into the other.

After blowing out the lamp, he locked the outside door and pocketed the sheriff's keys.

Claymore and Alice had gone out to the horses ahead of Mason, and he heard the man say, "This is a damn peculiar situation."

"It is," Alice agreed. "Do you intend to accuse Raines of having gotten the money and trying to keep it a secret, or what?"

"If Raines has it, he should be satisfied. Yet he probably won't believe that I intended to return it to him. He'll demand that I tell him who helped me rob the Red Moose in the first place."

"Are you going to tell him?" Alice asked.

"Never."

Joining them in the starlight, Mason said impulsively, "I agree with you, Claymore. Don't tell anybody who helped you."

"I suppose you think you know who they are?" the man ripped out.

"I wouldn't even make a wild guess," Mason returned. Regardless of what Sheriff Tepley might think, Mason had decided that he wanted no part of exposing Dorn and Maxwell.

Claymore, who had been eying him steadily, muttered, "I still can't figure you out. Why don't you come clean with me and Alice?"

Remembering his bargain with Tepley, Mason answered, "I can't talk until the deal is settled. There's a stable back of this jail. Let's see if it'll hold all six horses. We may be in town quite a spell."

THE HORSES stalled, Claymore expressed a desire to see his wife.

"Hold off, and maybe you'll have better news for her," Mason said, leading they way to the depot. He went in alone and sent a telegram to Sheriff Tepley at Burnt Fork, asking him to come to Grayhorse, quick.

"Hey, what do you want Tepley for?" the station agent demanded.

"Any excitement in town you've heard of?" Mason countered.

"Not a thing. Never seen it so dead. Why are you sendin' for Tepley?"

"I want him here, pronto," returned Mason and walked out.

"The sheriff can be here in a couple of hours if he hops the next train," he told Alice and her father. "Now let's call on Raines. I've never met the man, and I want to size him up."

"Are you sure you've never met him?" demanded Claymore truculently. "Look here, Mason, you put Gore and his toughs in the jug, and you've sent for Tepley, things which make it look like you're on the up and up. But, like Harry Gore, I'm satisfied you handed Raines that money. So now I'll make talk to that thieving tinhorn and I'll—"

Mason faced the angry ranchman, clapped a hand on his shoulder and retorted, "Either you promise to hold your temper while I talk to the man, or stay clear away. Which'll it be?"

"Well, I want to hear every word that you say. All right. I'll keep my lips buttoned."

Alice tucked her hand under his arm. "I'm sure that'll be much the wisest, Daddy. Although I can't tell why I should, I find myself trusting Art Mason."

Mason felt as if he had just received a long cherished award. He led the way to the Red Moose. It was dark, apparently deserted. Alice piloted the two men to a

small cottage where Raines, in bathrobe and slippers, smoking a brier pipe, answered her rap on the door.

"Alice! Is something wrong? Come on in."

The man was of medium size, closely knit, wiry, athletic. He had a lined face with sharp chin and nose, firm lips, and keen eyes surrounded by tiny wrinkles.

Raines had seen the two men with Alice and his ejaculation showed the real surprise. "Hubert Claymore! Where'd you come from?"

Alice broke the following silence. "You didn't know Father had been released on parole, Mr. Raines?"

"On parole, eh? Good! Come in, Hu, and bring your friend." He motioned with his pipe.

THE THREE entered. Raines closed the door, swept a newspaper from a comfortable chair and pushed it toward Alice saying, "Find seats for yourselves, men."

"Mr. Raines, this is Art Mason," said Alice quickly.

The man held out his hand when Alice introduced Mason. Although rather small, with tapering fingers, Mason felt its firm grip. "You're a friend of the Claymores?" Raines asked.

"I hope to be," returned Mason. "Getting right to the point, I'm here to put in a good word for Hubert Claymore."

Alice had sunk into the easy chair, her hands nervously twisting her handkerchief. Her eyes were tired and clouded with worry, fear and uncertainty.

Mason felt her problems as keenly as if they had been his own. Somehow he must give her a feeling of assurance in a stable future, and if possible dispel the shadow under which she was now living. He glanced at her, noting what a charming picture she made under Raines' reading lamp.

Claymore remained standing, face frozen. His smouldering eyes clearly revealed his hostility toward the gambler, and Mason feared the man might blow his top.

"Where do you fit into this, Mason?" Raines asked. "Are you a deputy U.S. Marshal? A special officer on the warden's staff?"

"I'm nothing more important than an interested cowpuncher," Mason answered, and Raines, throwing one quick, comprehensive glance at Alice, uttered a significant, "Ah?"

The girl blushed, opened her lips as if to protest, thought better of it and remained silent. Ignoring this slight digression, Mason went on, "I can assure you that Claymore hoped to return to you, or to the proper authorities, the loot from the Red Moose robbery."

"Ye-es," said Raines doubtfully. "Mason, I've never gone along with the theory, which is merely a theory, that Claymore cached the money."

Mason's eyebrows went up. "Then what was your opinion, Raines?" he inquired.

Raines pointed his pipe stem at him. "You're a stranger here, so all you can know of what happened is through hearsay. You must have heard of High Hat Harry Gore?"

"I've heard of him!"

"And that he was my right-hand man?"

Mason nodded.

"But that isn't true. For a time Gore was one of my dealers, until I discharged him for crooked work. Afterward, he hung around, making his living by gambling and, according to rumor, by taking part in minor holdups, usually staged by two masked men."

"Taking for granted that Gore was one of these bandits, who was the other?" Mason demanded.

Raines shook his head. "I still have no idea. Getting back to the Red Moose robbery, I believe that Harry Gore and an unknown man helped Hu Claymore, and that Gore and his pal rode out with the money, leaving Claymore holding the bag."

"Reasonable theory," agreed Mason. "Only—" he stopped. Since he hoped to trap Raines, it would be foolish of him to mention that his theory had been blown up. He went on quickly, "Have you heard anything about Gore since that robbery, Raines?"

"No. But I think he's again in our country."

ALICE'S eyes widened as Mason asked eagerly, "Yes?"

"In the old days, Gore was presumably operating here, strewing in his wake little mementoes which belonged to me. On two different occasions in those days my saddle horse was ridden at night. Last night the very same thing happened again."

"How do you mean?" Mason prompted.

"I have a small stable and corral on my own property, and I take care of Teddy myself. This morning, Teddy was tired. He had been ridden hard, his legs gave evidence that he had been in a river too. This thing has all the earmarks of High Hat Harry, presuming always that he was responsible for those earlier holdups."

"Why didn't you notify the sheriff?" asked Mason, his thoughts running fast.

"Notify the sheriff?" The gambler put his pipe in a tray on the table. "Tepley's never been of any help to me. He arrested Claymore, but let the big fish get away. He looked me up a day or two ago, just to tell me that he had been called to Burnt Fork and would be gone for an indefinite period. You haven't heard of anyone's being held up last night, Mason?"

Mason evaded the question with a shrug. Raines seated himself on a corner of the table, and as he lifted his right foot clear of the floor his loose slipper fell off. Mason stooped and put the slipper back on the man's foot.

Then he said, "Let's get back to Claymore. At one time, Raines, you must have believed in him and trusted him, since you staked him to nine thousand dollars?"

Raines nodded, his face tight and unreadable. "Mason, even though Alice and Claymore are both here—and this must be painful to Alice—we are talking plainly. But when Claymore lost that money, he held me to blame for it."

Claymore turned and flared out hotly, "I'm still sure, Raines, that you helped Gore rob me."

"Steady!" put in Mason quickly. "I'll do the talking."

Claymore turned to a survey of Raines' pictures. Alice's hands were now still, her eyes hopefully on Mason, or so he thought. But Mason was baffled. He feared he hadn't even a remote chance of getting Raines to admit he had recovered the money from the Red Moose robbery.

"Raines, if Claymore were to return the money taken in the Red Moose robbery, would you—" he hesitated.

"I'd accept it gladly," said the gambler, "and do everything in my power to see that he got a full pardon."

Once again his glance had gone to Alice, and Mason, watching the man as a bronc-rider watches the horse he is about to step across, saw Raines' dark eyes light with tenderness and sympathy.

"That," said Mason earnestly, "is what I wanted to hear you say. But Claymore would still owe you the nine thousand dollars of which he was robbed."

RAINES sprang to his feet and faced Mason. "If I got back the forty thousand, I'd cancel that other. Is that what you came to see me about?"

"Yes."

"Then," with sudden lively interest, "there is some hope that Claymore can—"

"Not right now, but there may be. Let's go, Alice, Claymore."

Alice rose from the chair. "Mr. Raines, frankly I've never known just what to make of you. But I want to thank you for what you just said. Good night."

Raines took her hand. "Good night, my dear girl."

Claymore was staring at Mason, his lips asking the silent question, "Aren't you going to demand that he admit he's got that cash?"

Mason shook his head, and Claymore ungraciously stalked out ahead of him and Alice.

When the door closed he said, "Any objections, Mason, if I go to see my wife now?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't wake her and Mrs. Andrews up just yet," Mason replied. "Suppose we get rooms at the hotel."

Hunching his shoulders, Claymore strode toward the Grayhorse Hotel while Mason and Alice walked side by side, her hand on his arm, fingers tight. He liked that. He also liked the silent night, and the stars which seemed to close.

"Did you notice Raines' feet?" he asked the girl, suddenly.

"Why, no."

"I did. His feet are too big for him to have worn boots, or even moccasins, inside the big shoes that left the tracks. But in the big shoes his feet would have flopped around like flies in a lamp chimney, and he'd have rubbed the skin raw in spots, or gotten a few bruises. I saw his bare right foot. There was no sore spot on it!"

Claymore had stopped in front of the Grayhorse Hotel. "What are you going to do now, Mason?" he inquired.

"Engage a room. Then I'll go to the depot to meet Tepley. I think you and Alice should stay in town, too."

"We will," Claymore returned shortly. "And when the sheriff comes, I'll tell him what I think. What good was your talk with Raines? What'd you accomplish?"

"Quite a bit," said Mason.

"Raines did a fine job of pretending he didn't know I'd been released, and pretending he didn't know you. The truth is, Raines hired you to shadow me and spy on the Rafter C, but you just told him you wanted to help me!"

"You've got a one track mind, Claymore," said Mason.

He went into the lobby, where a lamp burned low on the desk and a clerk dozed in a chair behind it. Mason obtained three rooms on the second floor, returned to Alice and her father, and handed each a key. "Get some sleep now. I'll mosey along to the depot."

"All right," Claymore agreed. "Let's go on up, Alice." But his glance at Alice told Mason that the man intended to shadow him and witness his meeting with Tepley.

MASON walked out to the street, frowning. If High Hat Harry Gore were one of the men who had staged those earlier holdups, who was the second man? Raines had said he had no idea of the other's identity, and now that Mason had talked with the gambler, he found himself trusting the man. He didn't believe Raines had any knowledge of what had taken place this past night. But who had gotten the money?

In the distance an engine whistled for a crossing, and almost at once the night came alive with the humming racket of a passenger train sweeping on toward Grayhorse. Hurrying to the depot, Mason saw the elderly station agent waiting outside with a lantern and a mail sack.

"Say, will you do me a favor?" Mason asked.

"If it's something I can do, yep. I'm George Inge."

Mason told him what he wanted, whereupon George Inge protested mildly, "But I didn't see Sheriff Tepley last night. What's the idea, mister?"

"Trust me. Will you do it?"

"Yes, I'll do it."

The train had stopped. George handed the mail sack to a man who leaned out from a baggage car and gave him one in return. Far down along the string of Pullmans and

coaches a brakeman's lantern glowed and by its light Mason saw one passenger alight. The train began to move again and the lone passenger, a man wearing cowboy clothing and carrying a cowhide suitcase, walked rapidly up to the depot.

"Hello, George," he greeted cheerfully. "Evening, stranger," nodding to Mason.

George Inge lifted his lantern to bring Sheriff Brad Tepley into its light and said, "Hi, Brad? What was you doin' here in Grayhorse last night?"

For a second Tepley was still. His right hand visibly tightened on the handle of his suitcase. "What's that, George?" he demanded sharply.

"I saw you about midnight," explained the station agent. "Looked like you was figurin' to hook a ride on a freight headin' to Burnt Fork."

"George, you must have been mistaken."

Mason was certain he detected a quality of forced banter in the sheriff's tone, and once again his nerves were tingling with anticipation.

"Likely some tramp," Tepley went on, shrugging. "Because I wasn't here."

"Sure, I could have been mistaken," George agreed. "Probably some Weary Willie hookin' a ride . . . This is the feller what sent a wire to you at Burnt Fork."

"You wanted to see me—stranger?"

Mason nodded, and then trailed Tepley as the sheriff walked around the station to pause in the darkness on the farther side. "How'd it come out?" he asked eagerly.

Mason was aware that Claymore was at the north end of the depot, concealed by the shadows, but within easy earshot. A good thing, too, for it was high time the Claymores learned the truth about the part Art Mason was playing.

"One way it came out good. In another bad," said Mason, and rapidly sketched his adventure.

TEPLEY interrupted, "You did get the loot, and you hid it in a yellow pine. But did you find out who was mixed up with Claymore in this?"

"I didn't see Claymore meet anybody."

"Damn it all, Mason! That was—"

"Hold your horses, Sheriff. High Hat Harry Gore and a couple of other bad ones showed up."

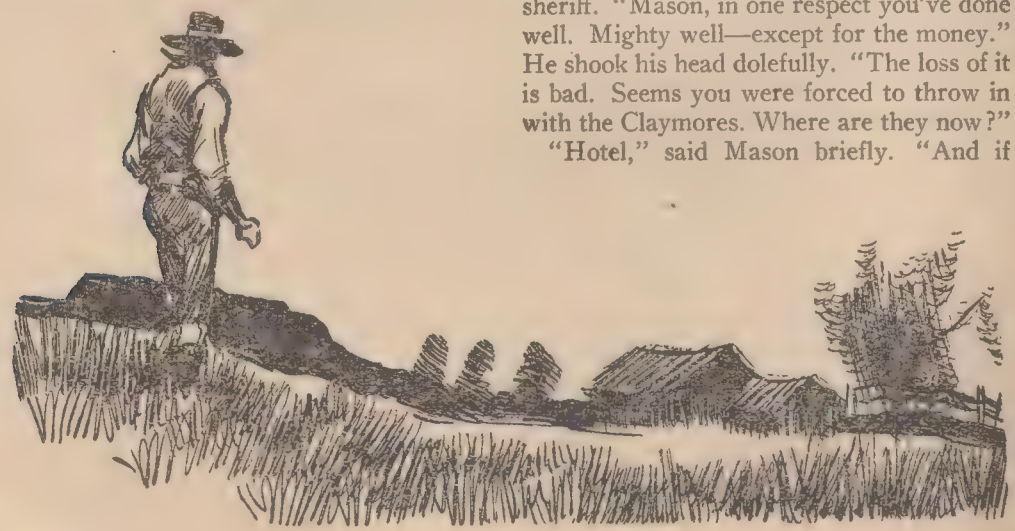
"What? Go on."

Mason finished and Tepley dropped his suitcase, as if thunderstruck. "Are you telling me that after all the precautious we took, somebody got away with that forty thousand smackers? Any idea who it was, Mason?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Sheriff. But this evening we got the upper hand of Gore and his pet rattlesnakes. They're safely locked in your jail."

"High Hat Harry in jail!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Mason, in one respect you've done well. Mighty well—except for the money." He shook his head dolefully. "The loss of it is bad. Seems you were forced to throw in with the Claymores. Where are they now?"

"Hotel," said Mason briefly. "And if



you've got nothing more for me to do, I'd like to get some sleep."

"Nothing right now," said Tepley, scowling and clenching his hands. "I want to get that cash. Come daybreak maybe I'll have some ideas . . . Let's go to your hotel now, then I'll look in on the prisoners. That was a real haul, Mason. I congratulate you."

They sauntered to the hotel, where Mason led Tepley upstairs to his room, lighted the lamp, sat down on the bed, yawning. "I'm so fagged out I can't think, Sheriff." He began to undress.

In the corridor outside, he heard the faint noise of a door opening and closing, and knew that Claymore had come in.

The sheriff paced restlessly for a few minutes, frowning as if in deep thought. "High Hat Harry Gore may have a good notion about who got that swag," he said suddenly. "Perhaps I can hammer it out of the cuss. See you in the morning, Mason."

He started to leave, then, turned back, grumbling, "I'm always forgetting this dog-goned suitcase. Never did take one along when I was out on a chase or a trail, but nowadays I take along a change of duds." He picked up the cowhide bag and went out.

Mason blew out the lamp, and made a point of settling down on the bed with as much noise as possible. He yawned prodigiously and began to breathe in the deep, regular manner of a tired man gripped by sleep.

Actually, sleep was far away. He'd never been more tense or excited. Sheriff Tepley's reaction to the station agent's remarks had been satisfactory, and Tepley wore the smallest high-heeled boots of any full-grown man Art Mason had ever seen—boots which could be slipped quite easily into a pair of huge shoes!

PRESENTLY Mason heard the faint pad of footsteps descending the stairs. Instantly he leaped from the bed, slipped on his moccasins and overalls, and opened the door soundlessly. Listening another moment to assure himself that Tepley had gone out of the hotel, Mason began an insistent tapping on Alice Claymore's door.

When the girl opened it, Mason saw her father standing at her shoulder. "At last we know—" Claymore began.

"Quiet!" warned Mason. "Alice, you know the people in this town. Get Raines

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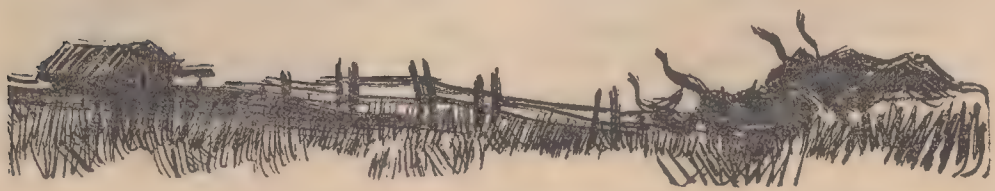
Coming up in the next issue

LAND RUSH

There Was the Land He Wanted and the Girl He Wanted—and There Was the Man Who Wanted His Land and the Girl Who Wanted Him

A Complete Magazine Novel

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



and three other men—good men—as quickly as you can. Be sure they're armed. Bring them to the jail, and have them surround it. Tepley must not hear you or them. Hurry, or you'll be too late. Your dad and I'll be there."

Alice ran down the stairs.

Mason gripped Claymore's arm. "Got a gun?"

"Yes, but it'd go hard with me if Tepley sees me packing one while I'm on parole. What's up?"

"We're going to trap a coyote!"

After leaving the Grayhorse Hotel, Sheriff Tepley walked rapidly to the jail. He fished a key from his pocket, let himself in the outer door, closed and locked it behind him. He set his suitcase in a corner, noted that the shades were already drawn, lighted a lamp and carried it into the cell corridor.

"Harry!" he called.

"You, Brad? I'm here." Gore looked through the barred door at the lawman.

"Who are your pals, Harry?" Tepley inquired.

"You wouldn't know 'em, Brad. You wasn't surprised I was here, so you must have seen Mason."

"I have. Harry, I figured I'd seen the last of you. But when you got wind of Claymore's release you came back after the Red Moose loot. You didn't get it. Who did?"

"My first guess'll be right in the bull's-eye, Brad. But I let on to Claymore and his daughter and Mason that we were dead sure Raines got it."

"All the evidence will point to Raines," agreed Tepley. "The proof will be that his horse was ridden the night of this big stunt."

"Sure," said Gore with a dry chuckle. "I know how you work, Brad."

"But you won't double-cross me. We parted friends immediately after the Red Moose robbery. I let you make a getaway."

"I remember. But I figured to get that wad from Claymore last night. You figured the same, and beat me to it. Now we'll divvy up, and me and my boys ride out tonight."

"Harry, I'm in a spot. This town'd lynch me if I let you escape now."

"Brad, you'll see that my pards and I escape, or I'll spill the beans. Grayhorse town'll learn how you and me pulled off seven masked holdups. I'll even suggest that Sheriff Tepley, the trusted peace officer, make good the nine thousand bucks we took off Hu Claymore."

"That's all in the past, Harry! Last night I was in Burnt Fork. I'll prove it!"

"Freight trains ramble at all hours on this railroad. Sure, you went to Burnt Fork, but you came back reasonably early last night. I know you hired Art Mason to shadow Claymore, find the cash and put it in another place. But you didn't tell Mason you'd be on the job! Mason still has no idea that you made use of Raines' horse, and—"

"Cut it!" snapped Tepley. "Of course you three buzzards are going to escape tonight. I'll get the cell keys."

SHERIFF TEPLEY walked back into his office and set down the lamp. Suddenly his gaze went to the front door which he had locked. It was open. Before Tepley could move, Mason stepped in, pocketing a bunch of keys with his left hand, holding a cocked six-shooter in his right.

"It's a good idea from your angle, Sheriff," Mason said. "But I can't let you go through with it."

Mason saw the man's face become drawn and white. Then Tepley's right hand dived to his holster. His Colt was free when Mason fired, the bullet shattering the sheriff's right arm.

"Back to the wall, Sheriff," said Mason. "Come on in, folks."

Alice and her father, Stafford Raines, still in bathrobe and slippers, and three substantial citizens of Grayhorse, all crowded in.

Mason said, "There's his suitcase, Claymore."

Claymore picked up the cowhide bag and opened it, the others flanking him and staring at its contents. Raines spoke first. "Greenbacks and gold, wrapped in shirts, socks and underwear! I'll probably be able

to identify some of this as the cash stolen from the Red Moose."

"Let's make this procedure formal," said Mason. "Claymore, close the bag, hand it to Raines and say, 'Here's the cash I once took from you, Stafford.' "

This formality concluded, one of the three citizens said, "We'd never have believed it of you, Sheriff, if we hadn't heard your talk with High Hat Harry."

"Go get a doctor to bandage his arm," Mason interrupted. "Tepley, Gore suggested that you return the nine thousand bucks you and he stole from Claymore. How about it?"

Tepley's throat worked. He wet his dry lips with his tongue. "There's cash in my safe at home. Maybe that'll make it easier on me. There's enough to square things with Andy Dorn as well as Claymore. I made a mistake hiring you, Mason—damn you," he spat out. . . .

The night was one hour older when Claymore and Raines, Alice and Mason walked slowly toward the cottage where Mrs. Claymore was making her temporary home in Grayhorse. Claymore stepped along briskly, eager to see his wife. Raines was keeping step with him, but Mason and Alice were lagging behind.

Her eyes sought his profile. "My heart's singing, Art. I feel as if I were floating among yonder clouds. What are you going to do now this job is over?"

Mason stopped and faced her in the starlight. "Maybe I'll stick around to help you put up the Rafter C hay—if you'll let me. And I never did get that drink of water from your well in the lean-to. Is it good water?"

"The best in the world, Art," she answered, lifting her face and smiling in a tantalizing fashion.

Somehow he had known that night at the well that he would lose his heart to the girl who had interrupted his spying. His arms closed around her, and she did not draw away.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Horses as well as dogs sometimes have the disease called mange. What part of the animal does it affect?

2. What state was admitted to the Union with a very scant population in 1864, largely because of the wealth of its silver and gold mines?

3. Though it is neither national park nor national monument, Oak Creek Canyon is a famous Southwestern scenic attraction—in what state?

4. In cowboy talk, what does it mean to "pull a horse's tail"?

5. There are many game and wildlife refuges in the West. Are these created by state or by federal government or by both?

6. Are Western wolves (four-legged variety) ever red?

7. The Los Angeles (Calif.) area gets much of its drinking water by a very long aquaduct from a well known river clear over in another state. What river in what state?

8. Wynkoop, Larimer, Champa and Welton Streets, named for Rocky Mountain pioneers, are in what capital city of what state?

9. Name at least three Western towns that are named, either in English or Spanish, for metals?

10. What is the more common cow country term for a calico horse?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 91. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

"I knew he'd switched the landing light," she said

STORE

HE KEPT the jackstaff lined smartly on the landing ahead. Even midnight, in this late summer, wasn't cool on the Sacramento. The heat of the inland flats mingled with that of the panting engine of the little steamboat. It carried a heavy odor that lifted from hot grease in the engine room, the wild flowers out among the oaks on the river flat, and a dozen hogs penned on the lower foredeck. It clung like an invisible fog, but failed to mar the satisfaction in young Luke Giles.

He nearly sounded the whistle again, but when he had signalled his intentions of making land, Mike Banyan had bellowed up from the engine room, his voice rattling the tin speaking tube.

"Who cares whether we make the landing?"

"Some hope I don't," Luke answered. He didn't mention the pair he meant, the merchant ahead at the landing and the pretty miss who clerked for him. The engineer had only disdain for anything that had no Johnson bar and throttle.

A snort from below terminated the conversation. Luke fell to thinking of Phil Prior, who ran the only store at the landing, and was young, handsome and possessive. Prior didn't aim to lose trade to a floating mercantile. With an intensity only slightly less, he disliked the thought of losing his clerk, whom he reputedly was courting between customers.

Luke didn't know if it was loyalty to employer or swain that kept Julia Lee's nose in the air when it came to the *Merchant King* and its young owner-master. This would be the packet's third call. Twice it had spent a week here, doing a brisk trade with the villagers and encircling settlers. But Luke had got nowhere with Prior's clerk, though he had gone into the store under every pretext he could devise.

There had come a day when the wind blew across the river, the packet and the town, in that order. A committee comprised of the whole village, headed by Prior, had finally asked Luke to cast off and be on his way. Julia Lee had been along, pleased but raising no voice. Perhaps it was her way of explaining one reason why she had little desire for married life aboard the wandering little merchant steamboat.

"If you were smart," Mike Banyan had contended thereafter, "you'd fumigate this stinkin' packet and go into the gold-field trade down the crick. All these outlanders have got to buy with is hogs, cows, spuds and grain."

"Good for cash in 'Frisco," Luke had rejoined. He hadn't been depressed. He saw past the '60s, and even the distant '70s, to a time when the gold boom would be over and California cured of its expansive, spellbound industry. Gold dust was quick-spent; it was only what a man worked hard for that stuck to his fingers. Luke saw a future in a trading boat. He liked the river, and he had found Julia Lee, for whom he had searched ever since he sprouted whiskers.

The shrill whistle of the tube told Luke that Mike had turned talkative again. He grunted into the funneled opening and bent his ear closer.

"You're running too far to port, Luke," Mike announced. "In a minute we'll be climbin' the bank."

Luke snorted. "How can you tell from down there? I'm dead on the landing light."

"Trouble ain't all I smell," Mike answered. "And when I go out to breathe I see the bank closer than it ought to be. You better veer a point to starboard, or them hogs'll be rootin' acorns."

"You're getting old and notional," Luke answered. "My jackstaff's cutting that lantern in two. It'd put us there in a pea-

BOAT

By

GIFF CHESHIRE

LUKE'S BOAT almost foundered on a sandbar. Luke was almost ruined, too, when he met adversity—and Miss Julia Lee

soup fog. You old-timers don't trust modern naviga—"

LUKE hit the big wheel so hard it knocked the wind out of him. The deck transmitted a jarring grind. It was gravel under the hull, a shoal, or an unsuspected bar. He heard merchandise crash from the shelves in the storeroom below.

The hog load, taken in trade on the loitering journey upriver, cut loose in grunting protest. He heard the sudden distant cussing of young Tom Handel, fireman, deckhand and helper, in the floating store.

Luke recovered his balance. Before he could issue orders to that effect, Mike cut the steam. The big stern paddles quit trying to wade ashore. The hull settled, with none of the bouyancy of a free float. Luke blew out his cheeks and shut his eyes. Grounding was no new experience. But he had been sharp on the channel light maintained by the townspeople so they could have steamboat service. The channel might have shifted without their knowing it, but that wasn't likely. Luke scratched his jaw.

The light was still two hundred yards ahead. While Luke stared, it moved, hurriedly and to the right. Then it came to rest again and remained still. He scowled, his shoulders pulling up. It was tight water in here. A forty-foot shift in the position of that light would ground the sharpest pilot on the river. It had been moved back quickly, so the blame would fall squarely on the pilot. Luke had to admire the smoothness of it, even though he was left high and dry.

He stepped onto the texas, then clattered down the ladders to the engine room. Mike Banyan greeted him with an unblinking stare. He was a big man, mellow as a crock of pickles, wedded to his machinery and his spleen. There was a bruise on his cheek where he had slued into something when they grounded.

"You were dead on course," Mike said. "As the fish swims or the crow flies?"

Luke grinned. "I was square on the light. But I didn't allow for them in a position to monkey with it."

Mike stared. "Somebody moved it?"

"Somebody who lives in his store, next to the landing. Prior was laying for us, and I tipped him off when I got smart and whistled."

A man whose spirit ripened in other people's adversity, Mike began to grin. "Not bad. You with a dozen hogs eatin' you poor. And you're on the wrong side of the river to trade. There's no bridge and no ferry. Luke, you met up with your better."

"Let's float her. We'll see."

Mike lowered a thin eyelid. "You had a look at the local situation? If this thing was on a rock foundation it couldn't set solider. You've moved ashore, and you already got you a building. Better put up a sign and start a town. It's the only way you'll get even with Prior."

"Ain't a getting-even man," Luke retorted. "If Prior done it, it was smart, and I might have thought up the same." He lifted his voice, bawling for young Tom Handel.

Mike's appraisal proved reasonable. Luke went overside and had Tom hand down a lantern. The packet had driven onto the gravel bar in such a way as to balance itself, lifting the big paddle wheel even. A man in a skiff might learn of this hazard. A pilot on his third trip up two hundred miles of unfamiliar river wasn't apt to, except in this fashion.

They tried reversing the paddles at a hard churn, but it did no good, for they had no drag and little floatage. They sank an anchor in the river bottom, got a hold with much effort, and parted two lines to try to pull her free with her steam capstan. They had no grasshopper frames.

"Looks like we got to unload her, Cap," Tom Handel said. He was taller than Luke, which gave him considerable elevation, but his shoulders could be spanned by a drawing knife. He wore an immature mustache with unjustified ferocity. He detested the hogs he had to care for as intensely as he worshiped his captain.

"Take a week—and it mightn't work."

"Want I should swim over and whale the tar outta Prior?"

"Not yet. Let's go see what happened to the store."

It was a shambles, with half the shelves they had built on the bulkheads swept clean. One of the big counters had overturned, compounding the wreckage. Luke had put his savings from several years of down-river piloting, with all he could borrow, into a down payment on the little packet and the merchandise carried by any good general store. Tom picked a flitch of bacon off the deck, wrinkled his nose and tossed it aside.

Luke sighed. It had been a good idea. He could undersell because he saved the high freight profits exacted from shoreside merchants by the regular carriers. But the saving was offset by the fact that the livestock he had to take in trade ate its head off during the weeks he had to keep it aboard. He just wasn't fixed to board this load very long, nor could he pay wages to a crew fishing off the fantail waiting for high water. He couldn't bear to think of Julia Lee's face when she glanced downstream and saw this ignominy.

SHE was behind the counter at Prior's, when Luke walked in a little after eight o'clock, fresh as dawn and set for the long day's trading. The caution with which she regarded him as he came through the door warned Luke that she already knew what had happened. Perhaps she had even known of Prior's plans. But he couldn't be angry with her, not when her face was like the flower of a lupine and her figure that of a sculpture.

He smiled pleasantly. "Good morning, Julia Lee. Feel like getting married this early in the day?"

"Where's your boat?"

"At the landing, where I just tied up."

"The *King*?"

"The skiff I rowed over in. Julia Lee, when your boss comes in tell him I've got a deckhand who wants to whale the tar out of him. But I won't let him. Not till I give Phil Prior a chance to square himself."

She was cagy. "What do you want of him?"

"Line enough to get an anchor on the east bank. We busted ours, and the elevation might let us lift off."

"Is this a threat?"

"I ain't a threatening man. But Tom Handel, my deckhand, is. He minds me only up to a certain point."

Julia smiled. "Phil will help you off that gravel bar as much as he would expose himself to cholera. Why don't you breeze it off? That's how you seem to think you can move everything else your way."

Luke stared at her with interest. "Is that what you've got against me, Julia Lee? I waited till the second trip to propose to you."

"Then you asked me six days in a row, over a grocery counter. You're looking for a clerk and a hog herder. You expect to pick up a wife the way you'd grab your hat in a fire."

"I was afraid you aimed to marry Phil."

"I'll marry whom I please, Luke Giles, and when I please, and it won't be the skipper of a hog boat. Here's Phil now, and you can tell him about Tom Handel yourself."

Phil Prior had girth if not height, but it was solid muscle. He had black eyes he could see out of, but a man couldn't see far into them. Their lower lids stiffened as he strode through the open door and perceived Luke. There was no other change of expression.

"The captain," Julia Lee said when Luke didn't speak, "has delivered an ultimatum. Unless you furnish him with line to float his steamboat, he'll let a deckhand beat you senseless." She smiled at her employer confidently.

"I didn't say that," Luke corrected pleasantly. "I said Tom Handel don't go at things peaceably, the way I do. He's a river man, with the notion a channel marker ought to stay put. Man gets that way on a river with more twists than a horsehair rope. In fact, it's so important there's laws to see they stay put."

"Ah," Prior said, and his eyes grew

denser. "You think the landing light was moved. I trust you've got proof so the culprit can be punished."

"No proof," Luke said. "Seen the light moving back. Far as I could say it walked."

Prior shrugged and smiled again. "Then I guess you're helpless. If that's all the man wanted, Julia Lee, tell him our line's new and for sale only. And that only to our regular customers." He walked on down the store.

"Do I have to repeat all that?" asked Julia Lee.

Luke shook his head and walked out.

POTTER'S LANDING was so called because of the first settler in the area, who had piled brush at the water's edge so the infrequent up-river steamboats could run gangplanks ashore. It consisted now of Prior's mercantile, a feed store, a blacksmith shop and half a dozen houses. Next to the river rose the rugged skeleton of what somebody had intended to become a gristmill, at a point earlier in the landing's history.

The place served a wide area, and was a point of call Luke wanted in his regular itinerary. Once word spread that the *King* was in, if she stood at the landing, the settlers would start for the village as they had each of the other two trips. Their wagons would be loaded with produce to trade.

Money was short now in the country, and Prior ran a strictly cash business. This accounted for his feeling against the *King,* if not fully covering that against its master. And it looked as if he had organized matters to his satisfaction, for the packet could not trade on the wrong side of the river.

Luke pondered this as he rowed back down to the packet. Mike and Tom had made an effort to raise the prow to give the paddles a better chance, but that was futile with the equipment at hand. Thereafter they had turned to sorting the litter in the storeroom and were at it when Luke returned.

"Couldn't scare Prior out of any line," Luke reported.

"He says it as if he's discovered a new planet," Mike grunted to Tom.

"Can't we scare up more line?" Luke asked.

"Got out every piece we had and what you had to sell. Ain't enough, and it ain't all heavy." Mike turned his head to relieve himself of surplus tobacco juice. "By the time we get off we'll of et up the groceries and the hogs will of et up your grain and we'll of et the hogs. If a man could, knowin' 'em like I've come to."

Luke was still wooling the problem in the pilot house when, an hour later, the first vehicles appeared at the landing to start the day's trade for Prior. And only for Prior. The last cheer had ebbed from Luke when suddenly he slapped the big steering wheel and bolted out of the cubicle. He was fairly running when he entered the storeroom on the deck below.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "I know how to work it!"

"Let's work it," young Tom said, and he swung away from his chore.

"Don't know why I didn't think of it a month ago," Luke said, in deep absorption.

"You weren't aground a month ago," Mike grunted.

"No need to have them stinking hogs aboard," Luke went on, unheeding. "Nor cows, when we have to take 'em. Least of all goats and sheep. We'll build a barge and rig it to the hogpost and tow it behind —far behind. We'll tie it up downwind from the *King* whenever we land."

"How'll that get us afloat?" Mike demanded.

"Won't. But it'll remove Julia Lee's objections to living aboard. She can have it fresh as a country picnic, and it'll be better for trade, to boot." Luke slapped Tom's shoulder so hard the deckhand snapped at a handlebar of his moustache.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" Luke left it in midair, for he was running for the rail break and the skiff that bobbed in the water below.

The hitch-racks, strung along either side of the village street, were filled when Luke strode past them at a clipping gait. He turned boldly into Prior's. Julia Lee was

busy with a customer and didn't appear to notice him. Prior was likewise engaged and likewise indifferent across the store from Luke.

A man waiting to be tended grinned at Luke, who remembered him as having been aboard the packet the last trip. "Hear you went aground. If'n you kin git on to the landing next day or so, lots of us'd like to do some more swappin'. What ought I to tell folks out my way?"

"Know who owns that old grist mill?" Luke countered.

"Why, old man Potter started to build it."

"Where is he?"

"Daid. You aimin' to grind corn?"

Luke lifted his voice so that it filled the store. "Aim to build a ferry so you folks can get across to trade with me. Swappin', I mean. I'll build pens and take all the livestock and poultry you can fetch. And do steady business till high water comes."

IT HAD the effect he wanted. Phil Prior looked up quickly, and so did Julia Lee and the others. The man Luke had addressed canted a gratified look at Prior.

"Why, that's suit us plenty," he announced. "You beat Prior's prices. And he just cain't be bothered with the truck us folks need to get rid of. Mister, tear down that old grist mill and build you a ferry. Old man Potter was my daddy-in-law. He'd count it a favor to the country. The wife was his only young 'un and she's mindful of my wishes."

There was an odd look in Julia Lee's eyes, almost as if this transaction had pleased her. It emboldened Luke to stride across to Prior.

He said, "Rather have me here steady, or every now and then? Could I get the line to pull afloat, there'd be no need for all that trouble."

"A ferry's got to have a line to run on, too. The river's as wide here as down your way. Build a ferry, and when you get it running come and ask me where I'd rather have you. If there ain't any ladies present, I'll tell you," Prior replied.

"Mister, you just dedicated the town of Giles' Grounding," Luke said, and he walked out.

An hour later they had brought up tools from the *King*, and her entire crew was engaged in ripping planks from the mill's heavy timbering. Old man Potter's son-in-law lent a hand, using his ox team to snake the heavy material down to the edge of the water. When he had to leave, Luke said to him, "Tell folks out your way we'll be runnin' by tomorrow morning. Tell everyone to fetch along what hay rope he's got handy, and all the truck they want to get shet of. What's good for the country's good for Giles' Grounding. Forward or backwards, that's the gospel."

"You just be open for business come morning, and keep a eye on Mister Phil Prior. That sharper has dug his spurs plenty into this country. But for Julia Lee, and the fact he's the only store, we'd boycott him."

Luke looked at him with interest. "So Julia Lee stands high with you?"

"Plenty. She probably wouldn't work for Prior except she's alone, and there's no other way to earn her living. Does what she can to offset his high-handed ways when she kin get away with it."

The trio worked with industry, having a sizeable accomplishment to make in the remaining hours of the day and night. The timbers were massive, so the construction problem was simple, though it involved a lengthy session at sawing and hammering. Luke decided on a hull-less raft, carefully decked and railed, to serve him presently as a ferry, later as a barge.

They secured their stringers directly in the water, and proceeded from there to save the heavy effort of launching. By nightfall the new craft had assumed a recognizable shape, but human weakness was beginning to display itself in the form of plain weariness.

Luke sent Mike and Tom down to eat, himself remaining to keep an eye on things. When they returned he had his own supper, elation high in him again. He had Prior over a barrel and lashed there tight. The *King's* shelves and holds held more goods than the shore merchant had on

hand, which could be sold for less. And the readiness to swap for anything that walked, flew or stood still would turn the feeling against Prior into a stream of gold for Luke Giles.

BY DAYLIGHT the barge was far enough along to go to work, and they were setting timber uprights on either bank for the guy line to be strung on. The line needed to piece out their own would have to come from the settlers, when and if they arrived. Mike would have to run the ferry while Luke and Tom waited on trade, and Luke didn't know how the old man would take it. Yet these possible hitches failed to disturb him greatly.

But he was surprised when, in the early dawn, Julia Lee emerged from a house far up the dusty street, passed Prior's store and came on down to the building site. She was in a fresh dress, and the gentle river breeze pressed it to the taste of the tired men who stared in delight at her.

"So you really did build a ferry," she said, and she looked at Luke. "I thought you were bluffing. Would you really stay and give this country the kind of store it needs? I've been saving in hopes I could buy Prior out some day. But if you'll stay and do what's right, I can forget that."

Luke studied her cautiously. "I'll stay till I get afloat, anyhow. Meanwhile, maybe I can scare him so bad he'll wake up to himself."

The disappointment in Julia Lee's face was clear. "I didn't think this was any more than a jackdandy trick to beat him. If ever a wick needed trimming, yours does. If it wasn't for the folks hereabouts, I'd as leave see him beat you. And he will. You haven't started to get acquainted with Phil Prior. He's taken steps to do it. I know, just like I knew he'd switched the landing light, without having any part in it myself."

Luke smiled at her. "Julia Lee, why don't you quit him and sign aboard the *King*? It's a fine river and a good packet. There won't be any more livestock aboard, because I set out to build this barge to make things more to your liking, then seen an extra use for it."

The girl's eyes widened. "You'd go to that trouble to please a woman? I'm surprised at you, Luke Giles." She turned and went away, disappearing into Prior's store.

"You almost had her for a minute," Mike said, surprisingly. "If you'd had the sense to show her you're sincere in your intentions."

"Is that all it takes?" Luke asked, and he went running after her.

The door wasn't locked, and Julia Lee was sweeping when Luke burst in. She looked at him in surprise, resting the broom. Luke halted where he was, at a respectable distance. He pulled off his boat cap, and his face was humble.

He said, "Julia Lee, I'll do anything it takes to make you love me. I'll stay here till I'm buried beside old man Potter. I'll buy Prior out. I'll swap with him. I'll turn settler. I'll turn angel, even."

Her eyes were wide, her lips parted slightly. Then she said, "Just why, Luke Giles?"

"Because I love you more than anything I ever run into in this world."

"Well," said Julia Lee softly, "he *can* learn, can't he?"

"Looks like he can't," a rough voice behind Luke said.

LUKE turned, and Phil Prior stood there. The man's face was set and dark, and he had his hands bunched at his sides. Then Prior shrugged and made a grin that was still pretty tight.

"Got your ferry ready, Giles?"

"Except for some extra line. The settlers'll bring that."

"Very nice," Prior commented. "But you haven't applied for a permit to operate it yet, have you?"

"Who to, and why?"

"Me. I'm the combined mayor, treasurer and town clerk."

"Didn't I tell you?" said Julia Lee, and her face was dark with displeasure. "He had a meeting here last night. People have to go along with him or he makes it

unpleasant. They organized themselves into a town."

"And we passed an ordinance," Prior resumed. "No ferry can operate here without a franchise, the fee for which is a hundred dollars a day. You ready to make application?" He paused. "Julia Lee, if you're through listening to the man's pretty words he can go now. If he ain't ready to sign up."

"He ain't!" Luke snapped, and he strode out.

At eight o'clock Potter's son-in-law drove into the village. The wagon behind the plodding oxen was loaded with hens and hogs, with two beef steers trailing behind. He passed Prior's store disdainfully and halted at the river bank, where the *King's* crew stood about in dejection.

"They're comin' by the dozen," the man shouted at Luke. "Reckon I brung along what rope you need. Let's string her up and get to ferryin'."

Luke shook his head. "They've organized a town and passed a law. Hundred dollars a day to run a ferry. Two weeks and I'm busted."

An hour later a score of such vehicles were strung along the street, and by now Luke had been supplied with line enough to fence the village Prior had so easily fenced for himself with his wits. The settlers, as they added to the numbers, were chagrined but resigned. Homestead life taught a man to accept the inevitable.

It was when they started to turn about and start home with their unmarketable produce that Julia Lee emerged from Prior's. She was running, and Prior was right behind her calling, "Wait, Julia Lee. Wait, I tell you!"

Julia Lee came up to Luke. She gasped, "Go ahead, Luke Giles, if you've got the spine of a fishworm! I've got money saved! I'll pay the penalty as long as it lasts!"

"Julia Lee!" Prior gasped.

She whirled toward him. "As for you, Phil Prior, I've put in my last minute behind your counters!"

Luke stared at Prior.

"Nobody's got to underwrite me. We're doin' business."

Prior shrugged. "Go ahead. I'll be here long after you're bankrupt."

"Doing what?" Julia Lee demanded. "I'm going to work for the *King,* if the job's still open. See how much country trade you draw without me."

Prior's face tightened, but he said, "Law's law. Let him ferry and he's busted."

Mike Banyan was grinning broadly, the first time Luke had ever seen it happen. Mike directed it mostly to Julia Lee. "You aim to marry Luke, so it'll be respectable?"

"Since he's gone about asking in the right way, I do."

"Now you've got that off your mind," Mike said cheerfully to Luke, "mebbe you can put your head to sensible use. We got men and rope enough to carry the *King* to the landing, if we had to. Let's float and run her up. They ain't got a law against that, have they?"

The settlers whooped their readiness. Luke's head still rang with Julia Lee's declaration. She met his gaze serenely, a kind of a smile on her lips. It drew Luke toward her at a slow pace, unaware of the others. At the last instant it pulled them together so hard there should have been a thunderclap.

When Luke looked around again the settlers were paying no attention, bustling about in obedience to Mike Banyan's bellowing orders. Then Luke noticed another thing. Phil Prior was backing cautiously up the street, young Tom Handel stalking him.

"Oh, call him off," Julia Lee said hastily. "Phil means well."

"So does Tom," Luke said cheerfully, and he turned her toward the skiff. "And it might decide Phil he'd better be a useful citizen in his new town. With us droppin' in to give him competition half a dozen times a year. If it suits you for us to keep moving."

She squeezed his hand. "Anything suits me, Luke Giles. As long as you know how to ask."

THE GOLDEN

YOUNG DOC was haunted by a Golden Witch. The trouble was he didn't recognize her when he saw her

He wondered just how big a fool a man could be

WITCH

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

WHEN he had lived in Rampart, Ed Brent had been known as Young Doc. He had worn a battered Stetson and a suit that was so aged it was more green than black, and he had been hungry much of the time, although many of the townspeople and the ranchers along the Wishbone owed him money. The way he saw it now, it had been a sucker's life. But he might have gone on living it—just as his father, Old Doc, had done for years—if it had not been for that moment in Ira Wilk's private office.

Ed stood there for several minutes as the stage clattered down the street, his mind filled with the past and the injuries it had laid upon him. He wanted the town to see him. Today he was wearing a new suit, tailor-made, of brown broadcloth. A heavy gold watch chain dangled across his vest. His hat was a new black derby, tilted at a rakish angle; his shoes were new and polished mirror-bright.

Lifting a long cigar from his coat pocket, he bit off the end and lighted it, his motions slow and deliberate. When he had been Young Doc he had smoked cigarettes, but from now on it would be cigars—and Ira Wilk would pay for them.

When he had made his show, he fingered the ash from his cigar, picked up his new valise, and walked into the hotel. He said, "Howdy, Joe. That corner room empty?"

The clerk stared at him blankly. Then he said in a shocked tone, "It's Young Doc!" He held out his hand. "Glad to see you. Say, you must have struck it."

"I've done all right. How about that room?"

There was only one expensively furnished room in the hotel. It rented for five dollars a day and was vacant most of the time except when some dignitary visited town or a drummer wanted to make an impression.

The clerk turned the register, dipped a pen and handed it to Ed. "It does happen to be vacant." He shoved a key across the desk. "It's all yours, Doc."

"Thanks." Ed signed his name and picked up the key. "I'll go up and wash before I see anybody. That road from Colorado Springs is as dusty as ever."

"I guess it is." The clerk chewed his lower lip, then asked, "You settling here again?"

"I may. Depends on what I can find."

"You ain't aiming to practice?"

Vast surprise flowed across Ed's high-boned face. "Hell, no! Do I look like a sucker going back to that penny ante stuff?"

"No," the clerk admitted. "We could use two medicos, though. It always was too big a country for your dad to cover. Doc Manning, who came in after you left, is working himself to death just like Old Doc did."

Ed picked up his valise. "He can have it," he said contemptuously, and went up the stairs.

LOCKING the door behind him, Ed took off his coat and hat and walked to the window. A small grin touched the corners of his mouth. The clerk was running across the street to the bank. It was working exactly as he had told Black Finnegan it would.

The grin died. They'd pull the job off tomorrow, if Finnegan got into town tonight. The sooner he was out of Rampart the better. He would never come back, and he didn't ever want to see Ruth Wilk.

THE MEMORY of old injuries rose in him again to sour his thoughts. In spite of all he could do, Ruth remained in his mind. She was his weakness now, and she always would me. It was

just another case of fate giving him a kick in the seat of his pants. If she weren't Ira Wilk's daughter—

After he'd cleaned up he put on his coat and hat, somehow failing to find the pleasure in these moments he had thought he would. He stepped to the window again, and instinctively his eyes turned to the little frame building at the end of the block. It had been Old Doc's office for thirty years; it had been his for two. Now the sign read Dr. Gilbert Manning.

Ed knew what was the matter. Old Doc had been a philosopher of sorts, adapting his life to the conditions he found in Rampart. Old Doc had been happy. Ed had to admit that, but Old Doc had also been poor, tired, and abused by the people he served. The strange part of it was that Old Doc had not minded those things. He had found compensations, but those compensations wouldn't do for his son. Not by a long shot.

Old Doc had had some pet bits of philosophy he use to repeat. Ed had been so tired of hearing them before he'd gone away to medical school that he'd had trouble sitting still while Old Doc had reeled them off. Now, and it seemed strange to Ed, one of them flowed back into his mind.

"Every man has a Golden Witch that haunts him. It may be money, or prestige, or a red-lipped lady. Or for the lucky man it may be a good woman, who honestly loves him. He's the only one of the bunch who'll be happy."

Ed stomped out of the room and down the stairs, angry because he had remembered it. It was Old Doc's fault if he'd chosen the sucker life. It wasn't good enough for Old Doc's son. He'd tried it for two years and changed his mind—or Ira Wilk had changed it for him.

The clerk was back of the desk again, curious eyes on Ed as he walked by, but Ed didn't pause. He crossed to the bank, his derby cocked at the rakish angle, and went in. He asked the teller, "Ira busy?"

"Howdy, Doc. Heard you were back." The teller gave Ed a speculative glance. "Ira is busy right now. Can I do anything for you?"

Ed shook his head, smiling affably. "You're the right man for the small fry, Frank, but I'm not small fry."

The teller said, "Ira was talking to Short Ken, but Ken may have gone out the other door. I'll see."

The teller disappeared through the door marked Private. Maybe Short Ken Hogan had been with the banker. Maybe not. It was a good excuse when Wilk didn't want to see someone. Ed knew because the teller had used it the last time he had wanted to see Wilk, only it hadn't worked because Ed had gone on back, and when the teller had tried to stop him, he'd hung one on the man's chin.

A moment later the teller returned. "Go right in, Doc."

"Thanks," Ed said, and went on through the gate at the end of the counter.

WILK rose and held out a skinny hand when Ed came into his office. "It's good to see you again, Doc."

Ed shook hands, thinking that the changes he saw in Wilk were to be expected. His face was thinner, the bags under his eyes a little bigger, his mouth more like the tightly-drawn throat of a purse than ever. Money was Ira Wilk's Golden Witch, and to Ed's way of thinking, she was a very seductive figure.

"It's good to see you," Ed lied. "How are you feeling, Ira?"

"No better, Doc." Wilk motioned to a chair and sat down. "I took your pills when you were here. Now I'm taking Manning's, but I still can't eat."

Ed lighted a cigar, canting his chair back against the wall. Wilk had had stomach trouble for years. That was the trouble with his witch. He worried about her. Old Doc had pointed that out many times.

"You'd be able to eat if you gave your money away," Ed said.

Wilk was shocked. "That what you came in to see me about?"

"Hell, no." Ed laughed. "I thought maybe you'd take some. I could have deposited this with Frank, but I'm in the habit of dealing with the head man." Ed rose and dropped a bulky envelope in front

of Wilk. "I'll feel better when this is in the safe. I got out of the habit of carrying money in Cripple Creek. That's a pretty wild camp."

Wilk pulled a handful of bills from the envelope, and lifted startled eyes to Ed. "I'll be glad to take care of this for you."

Ed blew out a plume of smoke and sat down. Yes, Ira Wilk would be glad to take care of it. Ira Wilk was always glad to take care of those matters, the way he had taken care of Ed's house when the mortgage had been due—the house where Ed had been born and where Old Doc had lived for the thirty years he had practiced medicine here on the Wishbone.

Ed had swallowed his pride and moved into the tiny back room in his office, but he hadn't been able to swallow his pride after he'd asked Wilk's permission to marry Ruth. Wilk had said Ed was just a down-at-the-heels sawbones who couldn't make enough to save his home. It hadn't taken Wilk long to curry Ed down—just long enough to change his life, to show him he was a bigger sucker than his father had been, to make him leave town without seeing Ruth, to send him to Cripple Creek. There he had met up with Black Finnegan.

THE BANKER finished counting the money and glanced up, his mouth looking more like the throat of a tightly-drawn purse than ever. Wilk swallowed. "Doc, you've got ten thousand dollars here."

"I know." Ed took the cigar out of his mouth and made a wide gesture. "Like I said, I've been worrying about having so much on me. But I didn't think you'd like to cash a check on a Cripple Creek bank, and I need that much to swing a deal I have in mind. After all, Ira, our last meeting was a little rough."

Wilk was embarrassed. "I'm sorry about that, Doc. I . . . well, that's water over the dam. How about coming out for supper tonight?"

Ed hesitated, knowing what it would do to him to see Ruth again, but knowing, too, he couldn't turn Wilk down without arousing his suspicion. He said, "I'd be glad to."

"Fine. Fine. If you need additional funds, I'll help you out." Wilk cleared his throat. "I presume you're planning on investing here on the Wishbone?"

Ed grinned and nodded. "In a way."

Wilk cleared his throat again. "Doc, as you know, I'm more familiar with business conditions than anyone else in the valley. I know the real opportunities that are here. I'd like to assist you."

This time Ed laughed. "I guess you would, Ira, but I've learned a few things since I left Rampart. One was something you've known for years. The world is full of birds to pick. The trick is to get your hands on one. Well, I've got one on the string, and I don't need any lessons on how to pick him."

Wilk busied himself making out the deposit slip. Then he looked up. "Doc, I have often regretted the things I said to you the last time you were in this office. I realize now that Ruth loves you. I didn't then, but my objections were based on the obvious fact that you couldn't support her." He tapped the stack of currency. "Now your situation is different."

"It is, for a fact." Ed picked up the slip Wilk had filled out, folded it, and reached for the checkbook Wilk had laid beside it. "In a couple of days my situation will be still better. This man I have on the string is a hard rock miner who struck it rich. Now he thinks he wants to get into the cattle business."

Wilk rose. "I don't like the way you put it a moment ago—about picking the bird." A small smile touched his puckered mouth. "But I can help you more than you think."

Ed moved to the door. "I said I didn't need a lesson."

Wilk held up a restraining hand. "You still love Ruth?"

"I always will."

"Then you need my help with her. As for your bird, you'll likely need help in a way you hadn't thought. A banker has means of making or breaking a man's reputation. Your friend will look into yours. Believe me, Doc."

For a moment Ed stood with his hand wrapped around the door knob. Ira Wilk would do anything to possess his Golden

Witch. Ed had known that. His plan was based on his knowledge of the banker's weakness, but he had not thought Wilk would bring Ruth into it.

"You're a cheap crook, the same as I am," Ed said hotly. "All right. I'll bring my man in first thing in the morning."

Wilk flushed. "I resent that, too, but we'll let it pass. What is your plan?"

"Circle K," Ed said. "I guess Rush Kennedy will sell out cheap."

RUSH KENNEDY had started Circle K about the time Old Doc had come to Rampart. Now, because he was an old man with the fight gone out of him, he had bowed to Short Ken Hogan, who was nudging him off the land. It was only a question of time until Kennedy would lose everything to the bank. This way Wilk would have to pay him something to get immediate title. The thought pleased Ed, for he had always liked Rush Kennedy.

"How much will your man stand?" Wilk asked.

Ed shrugged. "Fifty thousand. Maybe more."

"Good. I'll ride out with you tomorrow. We'll see you tonight?"

"I'll be there," Ed said, and went out.

It had gone better than Ed had expected. Ira Wilk had run true to form, following the channel his stream of life had cut years before. But there was little real satisfaction in Ed. The memory of Old Doc was partly responsible. He had lived in his world of philosophy, lived with his homespun aphorisms that had been workable texts for his way of life. Simple truths like, "A man with an uneasy conscience is never lonely. It always keeps him company."

Later in the day Ed saw Wilk leave the bank, take his horse and buggy from the livery stable, and head up-river. His Golden Witch would ride in the seat beside him. He would see Rush Kennedy and buy Circle K for a pittance, but a pittance was better than nothing.

The afternoon was a slow one for Ed. He was received as he had known he would be. The Rampart people shook hands with him, said they were glad to see him, and asked if he was staying. He gave the evasive answers he had planned. He had a drink with Short Ken Hogan, who said his ticker was acting up and hinted around for some professional advice. After that Ed stepped into the Mercantile and shook hands with Jud Loman, saying nothing about his pretty blonde wife. Jud, Ed saw, was more nervous than ever.

As the afternoon wore on, the truth of Old Doc's saying about an uneasy conscience became more deeply etched upon his mind than ever. There were plenty of men like Ira Wilk, Short Ken Hogan, and Jud Loman. He felt only pity for them. But there were others, too, for whom he felt pity in quite another way. There were—and he was shocked by the thought—the kind his father had been.

There was old Tom Gantry, the town marshal, who had given Rampart honest law enforcement for more years than Ed could remember. Sam Anders, the druggist, who had just installed a soda fountain, hoping it would add to his meager income. A lot of people owed Sam money, too, but Ed had never heard of Sam turning anyone down who needed epson salts or horse liniment or a prescription filled. Billy Clyde, the kid who worked for Jud Loman and wanted to be a vet, was another. Old Doc had brought him into the world fifteen years before. Ed had doctored him through a bad case of typhoid fever just before he'd left town, and now Billy was pathetically grateful.

"I sure hope you stay, Doc," Billy said. "You and Doc Manning would get along fine. He's loaned me books to read and showed me lots of things. He says this valley needs a vet awful bad. I'm saving my money. Got it in the bank. I'm going to school and coming back here to live."

ED HAD a shave and a haircut he didn't need, closing his eyes as he listened to barber's talk, gossip he would rather not have heard, for it only added to his knowledge of the town and the valley, this strange social fabric woven out of good and evil and human weakness.

At six o'clock Ed walked up the hill to

Ira Wilk's place, a fine brick house with a metal fence around the yard, a row of sprawling cottonwoods along the front, and a carefully tended lawn, a place that publicly testified to Wilk's position and affluence.

Ed pulled the bell cord, and Ruth opened the door almost at once. She stood very tall, her eyes fixed on him in the hungry way a woman looks at the man she loves. She said, "Come in, Ed. I'm glad Dad asked you for supper. I'm afraid I wouldn't have seen you if he hadn't."

He went in and hung his hat on the rack in the hall. He didn't kiss her. He wanted to, but a man could not kiss a woman he had run out on the way he had Ruth. A sickness crawled into him as he wondered how big a fool a man could be. She kept on looking at him, her face tinted by the evening sunlight falling through the colored glass of the front door. She was in no way like Ira Wilk.

"I'm glad to be here, Ruth," he said, and looked away, afraid she would see his feelings in his face.

"Come into the parlor, Ed. Supper is almost ready."

He followed her to the door, and stopped there, uncertainty in him. A stranger sat in the walnut love seat in the corner, a grey man with a weary slackness in his shoulders.

Even before Ruth introduced him, Ed guessed who he was.

"Ed, I want you to meet Doctor Manning," Ruth said.

Manning rose and held out his hand. "I'm glad to meet you, Ed. I should call you Young Doc, since almost everyone else does."

"Glad to know you," Ed said, and shook hands.

"Excuse me." Ruth hurried out of the room, calling back, "Dad just got home. We'll eat as soon as he's ready."

"I hope you're planning to resume your practice here," Manning said. "There's room for both of us. We'll share your old office if you're interested."

"No," Ed said quickly. "I won't be here long."

"I'm sorry." Manning sat down. "I was selfish in wanting you to stay. Just too much country for one man to cover. I don't know how Old Doc held up for thirty years. I'm tired now."

"I know how it goes," Ed said.

Manning lifted a pipe from his pocket. "I hope there will come a day when folks think of me the way they do Old Doc. I've never seen anything like it. He's as near worshipped as a man could be." Manning filled his pipe and tamped the tobacco down. "And you did mighty well yourself. From what Billy Clyde tells me, he wouldn't be alive if it hadn't been for you."

"He was pretty sick, all right," Ed answered.

Ruth called, "We're ready to have dinner now."

It was not a good meal. There was nothing wrong with the steak and the potato salad and the thick wedge of apple pie. Ed just didn't have any appetite. Here he was sitting with his feet under Ira Wilk's table, a place that had been forbidden to him a year before, sitting where he could not help seeing Ruth's face and knowing that he wanted her more than anything else in the world.

Just an Old Spanish Custom

By LIMERICK LUKE

A purty dudeen from the East
Attended a *vaquero* feast.
Her smiles were flirtatious.
And my goodness gracious!
The first thing she knew she got keessed!

IRA WILK grimaced over his bread and milk, saying, "Funny that with two sawbones here at the table, I can't touch that steak."

"I thought Ed wasn't a sawbones now," Ruth said.

"A man never forgets," Manning said quietly. "He'll be practicing somewhere before long. I'd swear to that."

"You're wrong," Wilk crowed. "Ed is going into business. He'll do fine, too. Wasted his time looking down people's throats and feeling their pulse." Wilk looked apologetically at Manning. "Glad you're here, of course, but Ed's different. He's got a talent for making money."

"That's surprising," Ruth murmured. "Very surprising."

Ed pushed back his chair and rose. What a hell of a joke this was. He said, "I've got to run. Sorry." He nodded at Manning. "Glad to have met you."

"Glad to have met you." Manning's look was challenging. "I hope you'll drop into the office before you leave town."

"I don't think I'll have time," Ed said, and turning from the table, walked rapidly out of the room.

"Ed." Ruth ran after him. "Ed."

He waited beside the hat rack, his derby in his hand, not wanting to face her, but lacking the courage to go on. She came to him, a little smile on her lips.

"Ed, is it too much to ask you what changed your mind? About us?"

"Didn't your father ever tell you?" he asked hotly.

"No."

"Ask him. Ask him what he called me because I had the gall to want to marry you."

"So you set out to make money?"

"That's the size of it."

"Then I guess there's nothing I can say. You knew I was twenty-one, Ed, and you knew there is no happiness for me in this house. But I'm not begging." She opened the door. "Make your money—and see what you can buy with it."

"I will," he said, and left the house.

The sun was down now, the last of the scarlet flame dying above the hills where the Wishbone was born. Ed walked slowly back to the hotel, crossing the yellow pools of light that spilled from windows along the street. He got his key and went up the stairs.

It had been a mistake coming back, seeing Ruth again, talking to Manning. Then a new, startling thought struck him. Suppose they broke the bank when they cleaned it out tomorrow? What would happen to the people who had their money in Ira Wilk's safe, people like Billy Clyde, who was saving his money to be a vet?

Ed went on down the hall and slipped the key into the lock. To hell with worrying over that. Wilk would keep his bank going someway. The door wasn't locked. Ed turned the knob, wondering if he'd forgotten to lock it before he'd gone. He shoved the door open and stopped. Black Finnegan was sitting on the bed, a dark, brawny man who looked like the hard rock miner he was supposed to be.

"Where you been?" Finnegan asked.

"Having supper with the Wilks." Ed toed the door shut. "I didn't know when you'd get in."

Finnegan grinned. "Having supper with the Wilks. Now ain't that cozy?" He rose. "Well, Doc, I've been in town a couple of hours and I've done some quizzing. You told it straight, all right. Folks think you're the angel Gabriel, and that your old man was one notch higher up. I guess it'll work just like you said. Your old man made a name for you, so we'll pull it off as slick as goose grease. Nobody's going to suspect anything that you're in."

ED'S SCHEME had been a simple one. He had planned to take Finnegan into Wilk's office with him, and nobody would think anything about it. Then Finnegan would show Wilk the short-barreled gun he carried, and tell Wilk to ask his teller to bring thirty thousand out of the safe. Wilk would do it, because he was a coward.

They'd leave, with the cash stowed in their money belts, walk out through the back door, get horses, and leave town. Wilk would go along, not making any

trouble—not with Finnegan's gun covering him. Somewhere out in the Colorado praisies they'd put Wilk afoot, grab a train, and by the time Wilk got help, Ed and Finnegan would be hundreds of miles away. . . .

Ed said, "The deal's off."

There was no change of expression on Finnegan's face. "I knew it would be as soon as I got to asking questions. You couldn't do it, sonny. Not in this town. Some other one maybe, but not here."

"I'll get your money out of the bank first thing in the morning," Ed said quickly. "I'll send you what these duds cost."

Finnegan nodded, grinning. "You figgered I'd make you some trouble. I ought to, I reckon, you fetching me out here on this wild goose chase, but the job ain't smart. We'd pull it off, sure, but somewhere out there," he motioned eastward, "you'd get to thinking, and you'd want to take it back." He shook his head. "You stick to your pill dosing, and next time some bright kid cooks up a money-making scheme, it'll be an honest gun-smoking job in a burg he never saw before."

"I'll see you in the morning, Finnegan," Ed said, and hurried out of the room.

The lights along Main Street fell across the dusty strip in long irregular rectangles. One of those lights was in Manning's office, and Ed moved toward it in a pace that was half a run. He went in and shut the door behind him. Manning came out of the back, pulling on his coat.

Ed said, "I changed my mind about staying and going in with you."

"I had a notion you would," Manning said. "I don't know what you had in mind, but I didn't think you'd go ahead with it, whatever it was." He walked to his desk and opened a drawer. "Your father took a bad beating, from what I hear. I guess he'd have died a rich man if he'd collected all that was owed him, but he was like a lot of country doctors—just let things slide along. Folks being what they are, they paid everything else first and let him go."

"I won't do that," Ed said to him bitterly.

"Hold on." Manning patted a book he had lifted from the drawer. "You kept records, but you didn't collect, or you wouldn't have lost your house. I took it on myself to send out bills for you. I've collected three thousand dollars that was due you. It's all in the bank."

Ed sat down weakly.

"I know," Manning said. "Some folks didn't like to get bills, but I sent them anyway and I've collected. After all, a doctor has to be a business man. Your dad wasn't and you weren't." Manning reached for his pipe, a smile cutting some of the weariness from his face. "I'm glad you're staying, Ed. I want to get married myself. Between us, we'll make Ira sell your house back at a fair price, or we'll see he has a hard time with that stomach of his."

"I guess I'd better go see Ruth," Ed said and left the office.

Ed walked up the hill to the Wilk house, slowly, for he was thinking what he would say to Ruth. Then he thought how much he had been mistaken that morning when he'd remember the moment in Wilk's office. It had not changed his life as he had thought. Actually he was like most men, for the channel his life would follow had been made when he was a boy, by Old Doc's honest understanding of values.

Suddenly Ed laughed aloud, the first good belly laugh he'd had for a long time. Rush Kennedy had made something out of his Circle K. Ira Wilk was stuck with the ranch, and when he tried to make it pay, he'd run into Short Ken Hogan. That, Ed thought, should be worth seeing, for both of them were haunted by the same Golden Witch. She'd make Wilk's stomach and Hogan's heart worse, and that meant business for Doctors Manning and Brent.

Sawbones in Skirts

By Harold Preece

She was the only doctor in twenty miles

BETHENIA OWENS didn't mind being called a lady. Lady, she reckoned, was just an everyday term for any woman, smart or stupid. But anybody who called her "ladylike" was in for a tongue blistering.

"Ladylike" meant not only the tight skirts women had to wear but also the tight lines they had to walk. If anybody in skirts ever bent tight lines till they were broken, it was the gallant Oregon girl who scandalized the ladylike by becoming the West's first woman doctor.

She'd inherited her dad's courage and cussedness. Oregon's toughies soon found out after they'd settled there that "Thomas Owens ain't scared of man or devil." Tall as a young pine, he'd been only 16 when a Kentucky sheriff had sworn him in as a deputy to hunt down mountain feudists. When he joined Jesse Applegate's wagon train to the West, he'd been made captain of the buffalo hunters who kept the pilgrims supplied with meat.

He settled down to raise corn and kids

At a time when women were mentally and physically hobbled, Bethenia had the courage to be herself

in Oregon. One crop was as big as the other. But Bethenia was the one he called "son" because she could outstrip all her brothers in plowing a row or lassoing a calf.

Respectable neighbors were already shaking their heads over her when, at 14, she up and married pious Legrand Hill. The odd match of tomboy with theologian lasted exactly three years. Bethenia was a mother at 15, but Legrand was more often wrestling sin at camp meetings than wrestling stumps on their homestead.

Bethenia herself chinked their one-room log cabin with grass and mud to keep out such unwelcome visitors as rattlesnakes and lizards. Meanwhile their fields lay as neglected as an unkissed girl. Their child pined for lack of food, and Legrand hated it as "another burden of the flesh."

The showdown came one night when the baby was two. Its stomach ached and gurgled from the six hard-boiled eggs it had been fed for supper. There was nothing else to give it. The child's whimperings disturbed Legrand's meditations. He arose and thrashed it brutally with his big hands.

Bethenia sprang from the fireplace and picked up the baby. She soothed its crying. Then she turned to her husband and tauntingly flung at him a verse of Scripture: "Suffer little children to come unto me."

Legrand Hill's face burned with fanaticism. "Twas ungrateful for the youngun to be questionin' the Lord's bounty," he answered doggedly. "The Lord provides."

Only then did the girl realize the contempt she felt for this man who used religion as an excuse for laziness.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves, sir," she said drily. "From now on, this woman is helping herself and helping her baby." She wrapped the child in a warm blanket. "Now good-by, sir. And don't mind telling the baby good-by."

Legrand was shrieking, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," when she carried the baby out the door.

That night she crossed the first of those tight lines which "kept women in their place." She walked out on a husband. Then, after she'd settled with her baby in her father's home, she divorced Legrand Hill on charges of non-support and took back her maiden name.

Once again she was known simply as Miss Owens. And that caused the neighbors to look queerly at her child.

THEY'D hardly gotten over the shock of her divorce when she sent them reeling again. She'd finished the second grade in one of Oregon's few schools before that mistaken marriage. When school opened in the fall, there was the divorcee, Bethenia Owens, sitting in the third grade with little tads.

The kids jeered and hooted at her. The parents talked about going to court and forcing her out of the class. But Oregon law provided that a person could attend the free schools till the age of twenty-one. And Tom Owens let it be known that "any lawin' again' my gal will be settled outa court with my shotgun."

Bethenia read all the books she could beg or borrow. Tom Owens crowed over the neighbors when she passed the state examinations at the end of the year and set out to be a teacher. She taught or attended school for ten years, eking out her slim wages by laundering, nursing, sewing and berry picking.

She and the child kept fit through her strict regime of getting up early, bathing frequently, and exercising regularly. She was probably the West's first physical culturist. Knowing how to take care of herself kept her good-looking at a time when hard work turned most women into shapeless drudges.

She saved a thousand dollars and opened a millinery shop in the prosperous town of Roseburg, Oregon. Almost from the start the business made money. She joined the local woman suffrage club and became a close friend of the great Western suffrage leader, Abigail Scott Duniway. Men, who figured she'd "forget such crazy ideas as women votin' once she got hitched," came courting. Even Legrand Hill, her ex, came whining to be taken back. She sent them all packing. Bethenia Owens still had a few

more lines to cross before she could remarry.

Secretly, she was studying medicine. Of the few women doctors in America, not one was west of Chicago. Nice girls didn't wield scalpels any more than they wore breeches.

Bethenia borrowed a copy of Gray's *Anatomy* from a local doctor sympathetic to the suffragettes. The only other Roseburg citizen who knew her secret was kindly Judge Stephen Chadwick, who saw her with the book one day. "Go to it, Bethenia," he told her. "You've got it in you."

But the news leaked out as things do in little towns. Roseburg was scandalized as it hadn't been since a town councilman had lit out for San Francisco with a half-breed Cayuse girl.

The conservative matrons stormed her shop. They swore that women were meant to patch their husbands' breeches and not patch up the ailing.

"Buncombe!" snorted Bethenia. "Women were cutting bullets out of their men and mixing up herb teas for their kids before any doctor ever tacked up a shingle in Oregon."

NOW tongues wagged and skirts swished angrily when she walked down Main Street. Even her child, bothered by the jeers of schoolmates, began asking in a worried tone, "Are you feeling well, Mamma?" And that was the hardest to take.

But a few months later, with only Judge Chadwick and her child to see her off, she was stepping on an eastbound stagecoach. She bought a train ticket at the first station, hundreds of miles away. Soon she enrolled in the Philadelphia Eclectic College, the only medical school in America that admitted women.

She finished with flying colors, but had hardly got back to Roseburg when the local doctors determined to make her the town's laughing stock. A pauper had died from unknown causes. The law required an autopsy. The doctors invited her to attend. They figured Bethenia's womanly modesty would keep her away. Instead, she stalked into the shed that served as a crude morgue. Then a Dr. Palmer, whom Bethenia had once bawled out for overdosing a sick kid with calomel, swore he'd leave if she stayed.

"Pick up your bag and get out," Bethenia replied. "I came here by formal invitation. You can take a vote whether I leave or stay. But, first I'd like to ask Dr. Palmer what difference there is between a woman doctor being present at a male autopsy and a man doctor being present at a female one."

"Any lawin' again' my gal will be settled outa court with my shotgun"

That stumped them. They took the vote. Four out of the five voted grudgingly for her to remain. Dr. Palmer, the lone dissenter, stalked out, to begin denouncing her to everybody he saw.

The other male doctors glanced at each other and tried another trick to put her in her place. They handed her the surgical knife. She hadn't counted on that, but, as the West's first woman doctor, she had a standard to maintain. Coolly she took the knife. Coolly, her capable hands performed the operation.

She heard the hullaballoo outside as she

was working. When she walked out on the street, she was greeted by a chorus of jeers and catcalls. "The hussy! Cutting up a naked man!" she heard a feminine voice hissing. She turned to recognize Roseburg's top society leader.

"Tar and feather her!" other men and women were bawling. The crowd surged toward her threateningly. Then two tall men with Winchesters stalked down the middle of the street. Her heart soared with confidence. They were her brothers, Flem and Josiah, the two champion marksmen of southern Oregon.

The pair said nothing, but the crowd took the hint and started to scatter.

"I'll have to leave Roseburg," she told herself. "Otherwise I'll be a freak and not a doctor."

She set up offices in the big town of Portland as a "bath doctor" specializing in baths, massages, and dieting. She needed many more courses before Oregon law would recognize her as a regular physician. In 1878, after building up a fine practice in Portland, she decided to make herself the professional equal of the male doctors.

SHE went East to be turned down by one medical college after the other, until she tried the University of Michigan which drew no lines of sex. In two years, by working 16 hours a day, she finished Michigan with an M.D. diploma. She went to Chicago for clinical experience, then returned to the friendly Michigan school for post-graduate work. Afterward, she toured Europe to study and visit at the famous hospitals there. When she returned to Portland she had more practice than she could handle.

She'd crossed all the lines herself. Now she'd help other women to cross other lines. She championed the right of the local girls to skate. Skating was solemnly banned by the city council as a too rough sport for women. She had a set-to in the papers with President Eliot of Harvard as to whether women should go in for physical training. "Women have to work harder than men because their work never stops," Bethenia answered back. "Anything which stimulates their blood circulation and tones up their muscles helps them to be better wives and mothers."

A man named Tallack began groaning in print because Western girls were abandoning the stiff, uncomfortable side-saddles. He claimed that the leg structure of women required the side-saddle.

"Oh, no, Mr. Tallack," Bethenia said in the papers. "God gave women legs for their use, and for the same use to which he gave them to men. Mr. Tallack says men's legs are long and flat and women's short and round. Well, in my time, I have seen a good many women with long legs and a good many men with short ones."

When a hubbub started over women walking bare-headed in the streets, it was Bethenia who, as usual, cut through nonsense. "I've made ten thousand hats," she said. "Hats help a woman's appearance, but sun and wind help her hair." She was glad the hatless vogue had started. She often forgot her own hat on an emergency call.

By that time she was an honored figure throughout Oregon. She was an outstanding professional, but she was still a woman. At 44 she fell madly in love with one of Portland's leading men, Col. John Adair. After marrying him she began calling herself Dr. Owens-Adair.

Her second child was born when she was 47. For the three days of her confinement she dreamed of the baby's future. Since it was a girl, maybe it would follow in her footsteps and be a doctor. Then, for all her medical skill, the baby died.

Bethenia was sick with grief. She sold her practice and went with her husband to live on an isolated farm near Oregon. For months she did nothing but cook and quilt and wash like the other women of that desolate area.

Then her neighbors drafted her back into practice. A lantern would shine in the window. When she got up, she'd find somebody with a tense face begging her to ride out on some hurry call. She couldn't refuse because she was the only doctor in 20 miles. On foot or saddleback, across swamps and through jungles of wire grass, Dr.

Owens-Adair traveled to lonely farmhouses, ministering to these suffering from colic or snakebite, grippe or gunshot.

The needs of life had brought her back to life. The thriving city of Yakima asked her to come and practice there. "I cured many of you," she told her neighbors when she left the farm. "But all of you together cured me."

Braving blizzards to fight the scourge

A DIPHTHERIA epidemic hit northern Oregon after she'd located in Yakima. Day and night Bethenia rode from house to house, braving snowstorms and blizzards to fight the scourge. She came to a farm where a young wife agonized in premature labor pains and a sister-in-law lay dead of diphtheria.

She couldn't let a baby be born in a house with a contagious corpse. She was thinking of the two babies she'd borne, and of the one who'd died, as she grabbed the primitive telephone on the wall. She rushed back and forth between the tortured girl and the phone.

"Hello," a faint voice finally answered. "Yes, this is the Yakima health officer. No, can't sign any burial certificate tonight. Leaving for a special lodge affair right now. But I'll send the undertaker to bury the corpse tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Bethenia shouted back, "there'll be a life here that's just beginning. It must not be destroyed by a life that has ended. I'll expect the undertaker tonight. Good-by." And she slammed down the receiver.

That night two men pushed through the snow to the farmhouse. One was the undertaker, the other the health officer. The dead woman had been buried an hour when Bethenia delivered the baby.

Shortly afterward she gave up active practice. Laughing at the advice of friends, who feared she might be caught in an early snowstorm, she saddled her horse and took a long, leisurely ride down the Columbia River to Portland. The whole city turned out to welcome her. The Governor was there, and he told her:

"Dr. Bethenia, I've just put my pen on the papers permitting three more women to practice medicine in Oregon."

She winked back and patted him on the shoulder. "That's just the beginning, Governor," she laughed gaily.

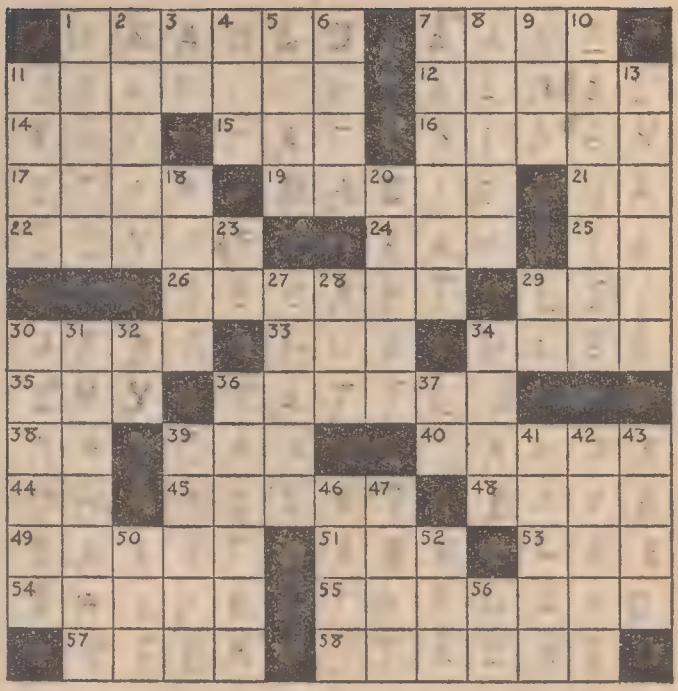
She was as good as her word. After a vacation in California, she led a delegation of lady doctors and other women to the Governor's office in Salem. They asked the Governor to support legislation to sterilize the insane and to require that engaged couples undergo medical examinations before marrying.

For 15 years without letup she fought for her sterilization and compulsory examination bill. Legislators laughed at her as once she'd been laughed at in Roseburg. Finally, after she'd gotten the law passed, a court killed it on a technicality.

"So after 15 years of fighting, we have to start all over again," she said quietly. But this time the fight was only a matter of months. In 1922 the legislature passed a foolproof bill which was made law.

Dr. Bethenia was now 80, a courageous little old lady winning her last great fight. After she'd been laid away after a few more years, an old neighbor started comparing her with her genteel sister, a quiet Oregon housewife. "The sister was always a perfect lady," he mused. "But Bethenia always thought she could do anything a man could. Maybe, she did—and maybe did it a little better."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Cowboy
7. Country road
11. Public speech
12. Onward
14. Movie star Rogers
15. To fondle
16. Horseman
17. Short jacket
19. Unbranded calf
21. Mother
22. Spanish gentleman
24. Raced
25. At home
26. Something not told
29. Limb
30. French priest
33. Color
34. Stockings
35. To weep
36. Western industry
38. Sun god
39. Boy's hat
40. Defensive covering
44. Exclamation of surprise
45. Item of property
48. Bird of peace
49. Clever
51. Macaw
53. Civil War general
54. Ointment
55. Head cowboy
57. Prophet
58. Western cattle

Solution to puzzle in the preceding issue

DOWN

1. Inscribed
2. Silk-like fabric
3. Near
4. To pinch
5. To incite
6. Upon
7. Cowboy's rope
8. Foreigner
9. To incline the head
10. Foes
11. Metallic rocks
13. Farmer's association
18. Part of the face
20. To salute
23. Concerning
27. Cowboy garment
28. Wheel track
29. Behold
30. From side to side
31. Western humped cattle
32. At the side of
34. Group of cattle
36. Furniture roller
37. Spanish article
39. To cut with skill
41. Grinding tooth
42. Baking chambers
43. Hollow-stemmed grass
46. Dines
47. Horse's gait
50. Malt beverage
52. Monkey
56. That man

Lethal Legacy

By DOROTHY L. BONAR

PART ONE

HANK'S black had ceased its hungry cropping of grass close by. It stood motionless, head high. Presently Hank, too, picked up the sound to which the animal listened—a tread of galloping hoofs heading his way.

The blanket draping his broad shoulders slid unheeded to the ground, as Hank's long legs took his lithe body erect. "Careful, fellow!" he murmured, taking up a position at the black's head. "This'd be a mighty poor time and place to get crowded into tipping our hand!"

The animal stirred restlessly, but quieted beneath his familiar touch. The pound of hoofs drew nearer, without slackening pace. Hank frowned, recalling the roughness of the surrounding terrain. Not only did rocks, brush and wash-outs make for hazardous footing, but a short distance on a wide, deep gully angled out of the hills. It had stopped him a short time ago, causing him to backtrack and seek out his present camp site. Although a good horse could probably jump it all right, timber grew close, casting shadows so deep that only someone in a desperate hurry would attempt the feat.

The unknown horseman thundered by. Hank held his breath, waiting for sounds

that would tell of a successful jump, or of tragedy. The swift, rhythmic tread of hoofs silenced for one dread instant. Then it took up again, receding.

"He made it!" Pushing his way into the open, Hank stared after the night rider. "Heading west, straight toward the Double Bar E!"

Hank turned, gazing back in the direction from which he had first heard hoofbeats. Over the edge of a tree-crowned ridge, a flickering light glowed in the sky. It brightened perceptibly, taking on a yellow-pink tinge that would soon deepen to red, he knew. Fire on Double Bar E holdings, and a horseman racing away from it!

Hank swore and saddled up. Mounted, he plowed through crackling bushes into the open, and drove home spurs.

The sky broke luridly to view as his

THERE WAS a million dollars involved in the puzzle Hank had to solve; a million dollars and—so far—one murder

black topped a rise. He could see red flames licking through billows of smoke, revealing the conflagration to be closer than he had supposed. A short, grueling run uphill brought the sting of smoke to his nostrils. At length the cowboy and horse burst out of a stand of pine into an enormous clearing dominated by the blaze.

The burning structure was a two-storied log affair he had evidently by-passed in coming out of the southeast rather than the east. But he recognized it at sight, by information he got before undertaking his mission. Dave Ellender had reminisced a lot about his old home to his daughter.

THIS would be the first Double Bar E ranch house, the stronghold from which old Grant Ellender had fought Indians, outlaws, and the elements. From those early struggles he'd amassed the fortune left now to be swooped upon almost as fiercely by scattered, greedy heirs. Eventually he had yielded to the demands of a shrewish wife and growing family, and erected lavish new headquarters on a creek only a few miles from Grantville, a small, thriving cowtown farther west.

Still, although its outbuildings and corrals had been torn down, the old fort-like habitation had remained intact, to become his favorite retreat. He had been stubbornly proud and tyrannical, incapable while he lived of acknowledging openly his mistakes and regrets. Here, Hank felt, he must have found the only real moments of peace during the final years of his life. Now it was being destroyed.

Snorting, Hank's mount refused to go any closer. Hank swung out of the saddle and tethered him securely to a tree at the edge of the clearing. Turning back to the blazing building, he froze inside, for a human figure had appeared in a second-story window.

It was a woman. He could make that much out through a shifting pall of smoke. She was hanging over the windowsill, as though almost overcome by smoke and heat and terror.

"Jump!" Hank ran forward, shouting above the roar of the flames. "Crawl out on the ledge, let yourself down by your hands and drop! I'll catch you."

She heard, or at least she had seen him. As he drove himself to a position below the window, he saw her head lift. She dragged herself a little farther over the sill, then slumped down limply in a faint.

Groaning and swearing, Hank stumbled back from the worst of the heat.

The entire lower floor of the building was aflame by this time, as though kerosene had been scattered through it. He could not hope to beat his way to that upper room. But he couldn't stand by and watch a helpless human being burn to death.

The flames hadn't yet reached the second story. It should be possible to climb the protruding ends of notched, crossed logs at this near corner of the building, and lower himself into the window from above. Once the woman was brough back to consciousness, she could be helped to safety.

Swiftly Hank unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it aside, unwilling to risk losing the weapon from its open holster. He hesitated briefly over the money belt worn next to his skin, its meagre contents more valuable than all the banknotes that could have been crammed into its pockets. But he could not bring himself to remove that article from his person. He was coming through safely, anyway. He had to for Joyce's sake, if nothing else.

Joyce...The old, buried pain twisted again in his heart. Then he was moving.

DESPITE the terrific heat, the searing bite of sparks, he reached the woman, finally. However, he found it impossible to bring the woman to. Choking on smoke, eyes streaming, he shook and slapped her, in vain. She continued to loll limply in his grasp.

He'd never be able to boost her up to the roof while she was unconscious. He had to find another way out. Throwing her over a shoulder, he turned reluctantly away from the window. Something tripped him. As he recovered, he caught a glimpse of the object—a suitcase, its contents wildly scattered.

Hank never knew how he happened upon

a window opening upon the roof of a one-floored addition at the rear. He got the sash up and clambered through with his burden. He tottered to one corner, only to be driven back by licking flames.

Though he'd won through to air he could partially breathe, could even open wet, burning eyes a little, their position was little improved. Momentarily the structure beneath them was apt to collapse, dropping them into the heart of the inferno. He glanced at the face of the woman he was carrying.

Seeing her for the first time, he realized she would never stir again. She hadn't fainted when he'd seen her slump over that windowsill. She had died.

The front of her dress was sodden with blood. It was on him, too, soaking into his denim jacket across the shoulder upon which he'd carried her slight, limp form.

An ominous sound penetrated the paralysis of shock gripping him, and the roof trembled beneath his feet. Its supports were swaying, giving way. Hank reached the edge of the roof in a single bound, and jumped. Ground thickly carpeted with grass gave spongily beneath his weight....

When Hank stirred after a bit and sat up, the holocaust from which he had so narrowly escaped no longer held any interest for him. His grey eyes were bleak, his brown, angular face had the look of a tight-drawn mask, when he bent over to examine the corpse.

She was young, probably about twenty-five, and her thin, heart-shaped face would have been pretty without its expression of agony and fear. She had dark hair. She wore a wedding ring. A slit in the bodice of her blue dress revealed that she had died of a knife wound.

But there was nothing on her, or about her, to give any clue to her identity.

IT WAS a young, untried lawyer's inability to hold his tongue beneath pressure that started it off. And it came about with the arrival of Susan Ross in Grantville. She had gotten off a northbound stage the previous afternoon, a slender girl of medium height, with a clear, tanned skin that marked her no tenderfoot, and long-lashed brown eyes that took in the town with quick, eager glances.

She was seeing it for the first time, although she had often heard Grantville described. It had prospered and grown, but it was still amazingly close to the picture formed in her mind. Delightedly she took in the cottonwood-shaded main street, the surrounding lush green hills that were topped on two sides by mountains, with a single snow-capped peak gleaming jewel-like in their midst.

This was mountain country, as different from her native Arizona desert as a pine from a saguaro cactus. For the first time Susan grasped the full magnitude of the change that was, perhaps, imminent in her life. If she actually inherited a portion of the Ellender fortune....

Quickly she snuffed out the thought. Better not build up any high hopes. Grant Ellender had managed to ignore her existence pretty thoroughly for all her twenty-one years. Why should he, just before he died, suddenly feel generously disposed towards a granddaughter he had never seen?

But it was too late now to turn back. Fighting down her misgivings, Susan forged briskly on until a lawyer's shingle bearing the name Jasper A. Bentley led her up an inside staircase to an office on the second floor.

A sound of voices inside silenced at her knock. The door was opened by a thin young man in a rusty black suit, who peered at her questioningly through gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Mr. Price?" inquired Susan.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I just got into town. I'm Susan Ross."

With a pleased exclamation, the lawyer ushered her into a dusty-smelling room, over-crowded with desk and chairs and bookcases. Beaming, he addressed the three people sitting wedged close together on a leather-upholstered sofa.

"Here's someone I know you'll be glad to meet," he said. "Your kinswoman from Arizona—one of the last two heirs for whom we have been waiting."

"Are you sure that's who she is? Sup-

pose you check her identification first?"

The rude interruption came from the younger of two men. He was full-faced and sleekly handsome. He had a small mustache, and amber brown eyes that stared at Susan with unpleasant intensity.

Susan guessed he would be her cousin, Brian Ellender. He looked not only suspicious, but scared to death some impostor would cut in on the estate.

"I can prove my identity!" she said. Taking a thick envelope from her handbag, she passed it to the lawyer. "Here's your own letter explaining how you were taking Jasper Bentley's place, and asking me to come for the reading of Grandfather's will. You'll also find my parents' marriage certificate, and several old family pictures. If that's not enough—"

"Of course it is, my dear!" The older man got up to embrace her tepidly, and kiss her cheek. He was stout, white-haired and florid-faced. "I'm your Uncle George," he introduced himself, "and this is your Cousin Merle. I'm sure we shall all become very fond of each other. Isn't that so, honey?" He turned to his daughter.

"Why not?" drawled Merle in reply. "What's a million dollars between kinfolks?"

Not sure just how to take the ironic remark, Susan forgot it with her first direct look at the other girl.

MERLE ELLENDER was tall and willowy in dark green velvet. Beneath a plumed, matching hat her black hair was drawn simply back to cluster in glossy curls at the nape of her neck. Apparently jealously guarded from sun and wind, her skin had a striking fairness that set off rich, red lips. Her eyes were blue-green and thick-lashed. When Susan had been found a seat, she turned her charm upon the young lawyer.

"You can tell us now, can't you?" she coaxed. "Now that Susan's here, that makes us four strong against only one more to come. And doesn't majority usually rule? I don't see what harm there could be in giving us a little advance information anyway. We've a right to know."

Jeremiah Price tugged nervously at his collar. "A will is supposed to be read with everyone concerned in it present. Besides—"

As his voice trailed off, as though reluctant to express a certain point, Susan perceived the reason for the trio's presence here at this time. Apparently the first to reach the Double Bar E, they were trying to persuade Price to reveal the contents of Grant Ellender's will to them without waiting for the usual formal reading.

"But Father and Brian and I have waited so long already!" protested Merle. "It isn't fair to keep us in suspense this way, just because Cousin Joyce is so slow getting here!"

"Maybe not. Just the same, she—" Again the lawyer caught himself, apparently on the verge of some disclosure.

"She what?" queried Brian sharply, leaning forward on the edge of the sofa. "What's so special about Joyce?" he demanded. "Is she the one who gets the biggest whack?"

"I don't know!" answered the harassed Jeremiah Price.

They fairly pounced upon him.

"Why not?"

"Didn't Bentley draw up the old man's will?"

"Haven't you got it here?"

Merle silenced the clamor by getting to her feet. "Wait!" she snapped. "Give him a chance to explain!" Stepping close to the young lawyer, she put a hand on his arm and lifted brilliant, magnetic eyes. "You've gone too far to back up now!" she charged. "Tell us!"

A wave of red colored the young lawyer's face beneath the tightening grip of her slim fingers, her disturbing nearness. "I—I'm not supposed to," he stammered. "Not until you're all here together, every one of you. Jasper Bentley stressed that point when he turned everything over to me after his heart attack. Grant Ellender had feared some possibility of foul play."

Gazing enthralled into eyes that went abruptly soft and melting, a sudden recklessness born of exhilaration seemed to seize him. "Jasper Bentley was a sick man

Hank became aware of empty space behind him

—fretful and imaginative!" he declared. "I can't see myself any sense in making a mystery of a situation already complicated enough."

It developed that Jasper Bentley had found a letter addressed to him in the ranch office desk the day after the double funeral for Grant and Eliza Ellender. It was dated three months back. Price cleared his throat and read it aloud:

"Friend Jasper,

I've never been satisfied with the will you drawed up for me a while back. It was all Eliza's idea. You know how I've always give her plenty of rope, trying to make up for the way she feels I deceived her long ago. That was my first mistake, I reckon. But by the time I realized it, it was too late to stop. I kept right on, being a bull-headed fool, giving Eliza a free hand with the kids and only jumping in and raring around when I shouldn't have. You know how they all left home as soon as they grew up, how I even lost track of some of them. It's too late to make up for all that, too, so I'm doing the next best thing. The last time I was in Great Falls I had a lawyer there draw up a new will—my way. I'm keeping it from you until you find this letter after I'm gone, so you'll be in the clear and safe from Eliza's hell-raising when she finds out I crossed her. Thanks for everything, old pard. Grant Ellender.

P. S. I mailed that new will to Dave's girl, Joyce, in Wyoming, for safe-keeping. Dave's dead. So is Mary. But Mary left a girl, too. Susan Ross. I had some Kansas City gumshoes get the lowdown on them for me, also on the others, since Eliza never would tell me much about their doings and I'd be danged if I'd ask. So I'm sure I've got everything lined out now the way I want it. I'm depending on you to see that it stays that way.

G. E."

AS THE last amazing word died away, silence gripped the listeners. Then Brian burst out harshly, "The old fool! He was crazy! Making out a new will on the sly and sending a valuable document like that to someone he'd never seen! Why, there's no telling what she's done with it."

"You're the fool, Brian," broke in Merle. "She wouldn't have to do anything like that. Can't you see it must favor her plenty or it would never have been entrusted to her?"

Brian's face registered stark dismay. "You mean maybe some of us won't get anything?" he whispered.

Merle frowned worriedly. "That could depend, I suppose, on the kind of reports those detectives turned in," she replied. "Personally, I've nothing worse than a few broken engagements in my past, and Father only a little gentlemanly gambling. But there's no telling how Grant would look at it. The reports should be among his papers." She turned to the lawyer. "Maybe they'd give us a hint at least. May I see them, please?" she said tersely.

Before Price could answer, Brian came wildly to his feet. "You mean he hired strangers to spy on us, snoop into our private affairs? They wrote everything down and sent it to him to read, and then leave lying around?"

His voice began to shake, faltered into silence. Abruptly he seemed to realize the interpretation that could be placed upon his agitated outburst. The angry red drained out of his face.

"It's not that I have anything to hide!" he explained quickly. "It's just the principle of the thing—the unmitigated gall!"

"Of course, dear boy! We all understand!" murmured George. However, a gleam of speculation had appeared in his eyes.

"You've every right to feel indignant, I'm sure!" declared Jeremiah Price primly. "Personally, I know nothing about it. The whereabouts of you three was known, of course, since you'd always kept in touch with Eliza." His glance took in Merle, George, Brian. "You were informed of the serious illness of the old couple in time to arrive here for the funeral. Jasper Bentley gave me the addresses of Miss Susan and Miss Joyce by word of mouth. Maybe he found them written down somewhere and never saw the detective's reports either. After digesting their contents, Grant might have burned them."

"But if he didn't?"

"Then they are undoubtedly among his papers out at the ranch—the ones I haven't yet gone through. Should I run across them, I'll be very glad to hand them over, unread."

Brian let out a relieved breath he tried quickly to cover with a cough. Again George shot him a searching, speculative look. Merle, with true feminine persistence, went back to the subject of the will. She wanted to know how the old one read.

Price cleared his throat. "It left everything to Eliza. Having been ten years younger than Grant, I suppose it was assumed that she would outlive him. Actually, as you know, the fever took her during the night, while Grant held on until the following afternoon."

Merle's brow wrinkled. "How would that have worked out?"

PRICE replied, "Everything would be divided equally between Grant and Eliza's children. Of four, George is the sole survivor. However, each of the other three left an heir. Therefore, the estate would still be split four ways. One part would go to George; one to Mary Ellender Ross's daughter, Susan; one to Ben Ellender's son, Brian; and one to Dave Ellender's daughter, Joyce."

"And what about me?" Merle's mouth had straightened to a thin crimson line.

"You, of course, would benefit only indirectly through your father's inheritance."

"Which would be just the same as yours, honey," George hastened to assure his daughter. "Haven't I always managed to give you everything you've ever wanted? And after all, a quarter of a million dollars is a lot of money."

"Not what you're likely to get, or Brian either. You forget there's a new will about to turn up."

"But—"

"Figure it out for yourself!" she burst out impatiently. "Grant didn't dream Eliza was going to die first, or he wouldn't have resorted to all this hocus-pocus to get around leaving everything in her hands. But why didn't he want to do that? Because he knew that she in turn would leave it all to you, Father, and Uncle Ben—the only two of her children she'd ever cared anything about!"

Warming to her theory, Merle's eyes took on a hard, polished gleam. "All those years he must have begrudged the sums of money Eliza badgered him into sending you two, and then to Brian, after Uncle Ben died. He never liked me as a child—considered me a loathsome little beast—which I probably was, all right." She shrugged. "The point is: eliminate Uncle Ben, Brian, Father and me, and you have the Dave and Mary side of the family left. He mentioned wanting to make amends for some of his bull-headed mistakes. He sent this new will to Dave's daughter for safe-keeping. Add it all up and what do you get?"

Susan, ignored for the past few moments, chilled beneath the impact of three pairs of hostile eyes. She knew how their thoughts ran. Her mother had never been forgiven by either Grant or Eliza for daring to run off and marry a penniless cowboy against their wishes. Dave, as rugged and obstinate as either overbearing parent, had also gone his own way. Both had struggled through their lives without a cent or word from home.

On the other hand, by keeping on the good side of Eliza, Ben and George had managed to live well, even luxuriously, out of Grant's pocket.

The latter's injustice to two of his children could be one of the mistakes Grant had wanted to rectify. He might have figured he could atone somewhat for his harshness toward Dave and Mary by leaving his money to their two children.

"Maybe he figured the rest of us have already gotten our share!" exclaimed Merle resentfully.

"I can't believe there's any reason for you to worry," Susan said hastily. "Changing his will wouldn't necessarily mean cutting anyone out. Maybe he just wanted to divide things up a little differently. Maybe..."

"Maybe dear Cousin Joyce will never get here with that new will. Maybe she'll drop dead, or lose it, so the old one will

have to stand." Brian's sarcastic tone revealed the deep, bitter fear of disinheritance he felt. "Stop talking like a little fool," he finished harshly. Abruptly he got to his feet. "I'm going down to the Lucky Star and get drunk. Anybody want to come along?"

When no one accepted his invitation, he stalked out.

GEORGE and Merle lingered to discuss with Jeremiah Price the possible trend of the new will, and the chances of breaking it in court if it should prove unfavorable to their interests. Finding the young lawyer none too optimistic on the latter score, their faces were gloomy when at last they took their departure with Susan.

On the street George said heavily to his daughter, "I'll look up Kirk and tell him we're ready to go home. I suppose Susan left some luggage at the stage office. You go with her to claim it, honey, and we'll pick you both up there."

"What about Brian?"

George's plump chin jutted out vindictively. "I'm not going to try dragging him out of that saloon and out of Blackjack Henser's clutches. Your Kirk can, if he feels like playing nursemaid and guardian. As far as I'm concerned, Brian can walk home whenever the sharkers get through with him!"

Joe Kirk, Susan learned, was the Double Bar E foreman. Either he was unsuccessful, or had also declined to try to persuade Brian to leave town, for he and George were alone in the buckboard that came along presenlty. In his early thirties, Kirk was tall, thick at waist and hip, with powerful shoulders that strained the seams of a wash-faded flannel shirt. Everything he wore was of plain, serviceable quality, down to an undecorated cartridge belt and holster sheathing a walnut-butted Colt .45. He had deep-set, quiet eyes, and a jaw like a slab of granite. And in a moment Susan knew why George had spoken of him to Merle as "her" Kirk.

He gave Susan a respectful "Howdy, ma'am," dragging a battered Stetson from a tousled dark head. But his gaze rested upon her only briefly. As steel to a magnet, it passed on to the other girl, and even the hard, set line of his jaw softened when Merle smiled up at him.

"I want to sit with you, Joe," she declared archly. "Help me up!" She slanted a significant amused look in Susan's direction at the eagerness with which the stalwart foreman complied.

Susan looked away. It was none of her business. Still, making a fool of a man was a cruel, feminine sport in which she could see no humor. A feeling of heaviness grew upon her.

So strong did her feeling of foreboding grow that not even the following drive through forested hills gave her the pleasure she had anticipated. It took the sight of a wide gate with the Double Bar E brand set in a pole arch above it to lift her spirits somewhat. Beyond, amidst scattered, giant pines, stood a huge barn and numerous other outbuildings, with an assortment of corrals strung along a willow-bordered creek. The house, set on a knoll above with the air of an aristocrat, was like no other ranch house Susan had ever seen.

Massive and white, with huge front columns, it might have been plucked magically from the Georgia plantation that had been Eliza's girlhood home. Clinging vines swarmed over its walls. An iron fence

surrounded its broad lawn and flower beds. George got out to open a double wrought-iron gate leading to a broad, curving drive that slanted gently upward.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Susan. "Why even Mother's descriptions didn't do it justice. And I used to think maybe she unconsciously exaggerated a little."

GEORGE helped her out of the rig, smiling cynically. He carried her two bags to the house, introducing at the door a stolid-faced, grey-haired woman as Mrs. Keyes, Eliza's housekeeper.

"She'll show you the unoccupied bedrooms, Susan," he went on. "There's about a dozen. Take your pick. After you've freshened up, I'll show you through the house. Grant always ate with the men in the cookshack, but the rest of us had our meals here in the house. The dining room..."

Susan accepted his invitation to be shown about, but she did not come down for the evening meal. Pleading fatigue, she had coffee and a sandwich early in the kitchen, then went straight to bed. She found, though, that despite physical weariness, she was too stimulated mentally to sleep. Long after night quiet had settled down upon the house and premises, she lay with eyes open, running back over the events of the day.

It grew late. At last, just as she was commencing to grow drowsy, a sound drifted through her open window—the whinny and squeal of horses from the direction of the corrals or barn. Brian must have hired a livery stable mount. Moments later she heard a faint squeak, which she identified as the hinges of the yard gate. It must be very still outside for so small a sound to carry this far, she reflected idly. And unconsciously she listened for the opening and closing of a door below.

As the silence stretched on, Susan's curiosity stirred. Drunk, Brian would never be able to find his way up to his room so noiselessly. Sober, there would be no reason for him to do so. Yet the sounds indicated someone's having entered.

Impulsively Susan slid out of bed. Donning slippers and dressing gown, she opened her door a few inches and peered out. No ray of moonlight penetrated this portion of the house. The hall looked dark and uninviting. Susan thrust back a reluctance to step into it. Determinedly she moved forward, intending to listen at the top of the staircase for sounds below. If it turned out to be a prowler—

Abruptly she froze. Someone was coming up the staircase, their footfalls a mere whisper of sound on its thick, soft carpeting.

"Brian?" she whispered.

There was no answer. She repeated the name more urgently, with the same result. The silence began to take on a menacing quality. Her heart commenced to pound. Then she heard a faint, scraping sound. Before her mind's eye leaped a picture of the mahogany stand decoratively placed beside the head of the staircase, supporting one of the bronze figurines of which Eliza seemed to have been so fond. There were many scattered throughout the house. Susan seemed to see the small, heavy statue lifted from its place by a stealthy hand.

Abruptly every instinct, every nerve in Susan's body shrieked a warning. *Go back! Go back!*

A panic that had nothing to do with a childish fear of the dark rose in her throat. Wildly she whirled, fled back into her bedroom and slammed the door. She turned the key in the lock and leaned against the stout panel, trembling.

Utter silence wore on. About her the entire ranch slept in tranquility. Had her fright stemmed only from her imagination? Susan was beginning to feel a little foolish, when a shout lifted in the ranch yard.

"Fire!"

AFTER a few moments of grim pondering, without result, Hank got to his feet and began examining the ground in the firelight. He came upon the gun and gunbelt he had put aside, and buckled them about his flat hips. A little later he found fresh hoofprints and wheel marks. He saw where a team and rig had been driven up in front of the place. Held back by the heat, as close as he could tell it had stood there a while then had turned around and gone back the way it had come. The second set of prints in a wide circle cut deeper into the ground; they were wider spaced, indicating a lengthening stride.

Was this a second party fleeing from the scene of the crime?

Impulsively Hank ran to his black, mounted, and followed the back-tracking rig along a road that angled eastward towards Silver Bow. Before he had covered two miles his hunch proved a good one.

Grazing along a side of the road, he came upon the team, still hitched to an undamaged buckboard, on the sides of which were painted the name of the Silver Bow Livery Stable. The dead woman had obviously hired the rig and driven herself out here. Her slayer had turned the horses loose and given them a scare, probably for the same reason that he had set the fire—to delay the discovery of his crime, and create confusion in order to cover his tracks.

Hank undid the halter rope of one horse and put up the lines. Leading the animals, he returned to the scene of the fire, which was still burning fiercely. Despite the late hour, its glare had finally drawn others to the spot.

As Hank rode up, he noted a number of saddled horses tethered to trees, and a wagon containing firefighting tools, few of which had been needed. Due to the stillness of the night, no burning embers had found their way into the surrounding timber. Here and there in the clearing, flying sparks and found dry bits to ignite, and these miniature blazes were being methodically put out by three men dressed like ranch hands. A group of other figures stood about the corpse, their backs turned. At the sound of Hank's approach they turned to face him.

Most of these were ranch hands, too, but there was also an elderly man in rumpled town clothes, and a girl. Before Hank had time to note more, one of the rangemen stepped forward.

"I'm Joe Kirk—Double Bar E ramrod," he said with a grim air of authority. "Is that your coat?"

Hank glanced at the denim jacket he had placed over the dead woman's face. "Yes."

"Then I reckon you'd better tell us who you are, stranger, and how you figure in this!"

Hank swung to the ground. He would top Kirk's even six feet by an inch, though he was thirty pounds lighter. But the compelling power of Kirk's gaze seemed to put their eyes on a level. Here was a man, Hank decided, who might never make a decision hastily, but once it was made he would never back up.

"I'm Hank Rawley," he said, and described himself as a drifting puncher, camped nearby for the night. He told how he had been drawn to the scene, and everything that had followed.

AS KIRK rubbed his chin, apparently weighing the merits of his story, the girl spoke up.

"I believe him," she said impulsively. "Look at the burnt holes in his clothes, how singed-looking he is, and grimed up with smoke. He must have had an awfully close call, trying to save that poor girl."

"Thanks, ma'am." For the first time Hank looked directly at her, and the unexpected resemblance she bore another girl caused his heart to turn over. The same brown eyes, the same brown, curly hair beneath a flat-crowned Stetson...the same strong, slender figure in jeans and flannel shirt...the same musical tone of voice.

Hank fought off a tightening inside, as Kirk began to speak again.

"His story seems to hang together all right. You didn't get a look at that rider you heard, Rawley?"

"No."

"But he headed toward the Double Bar E." Kirk rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I heard the horses in the corral raisin' a fuss. That's what routed me out of bed to spot this fire. But they could have nickered to someone passin' by."

Hank didn't believe any killer fleeing from the scene of such a crime would pass close to any ranch buildings, and risk being identified. Before he could express the point, the girl spoke up again.

"I heard the horses, too. I was lying awake. A little later I heard the yard gate creak, and, I'm almost positive—" She stopped. Hank saw her gaze flash to the older man in something of dismay.

"You're positive of what?" Kirk pressed her.

"I think someone entered the house," she finished. Reluctantly she described going out into the hall to investigate, and being frightened back to her room.

"In other words, you heard the murderer sneaking in after his crime," commented the white-haired man harshly. "And if you hadn't got scared and turned back, before accosting him in the hall, he'd have brained you with that statue to keep his identity concealed. Do you realize whom you're pinning this murder on? Or is that what you want to do?"

"Hold on," Kirk broke in hastily. "There's no sense flying off the handle at each other until all the facts are known. First, how can we start pinning this on anyone until we know for sure who the dead woman is and why she was killed?"

The girl's gaze and that of the white-haired man locked. Then the latter shrugged. "That's obvious, I should think. She's a stranger, about the right age, and dark like Dave. Who could she be but Joyce Ellender?"

Though he'd been more than half expecting it, the name hit Hank with a solid jolt. He opened his mouth to correct that mistaken conclusion, but caught himself and set his jaw instead.

Kirk looked from one to the other in amazement. "Why should anyone want to kill Miss Joyce?" he queried.

Again the girl and the elder man exchanged an uncomfortable glance. The girl said slowly, "I'm not sure. But Lawyer Price told us this afternoon about a secret, later will she was supposed to fetch. There was good reason to believe it would cut some of us out of a quarter of a million apiece."

"Our palaverin' won't settle anything, I reckon," Kirk said heavily. "This is a job for the sheriff. Slim!" He singled out a short, squat puncher. "Hit for Silver Bow, pronto. Chuck, Porky, Casino—you three stick here and keep an eye on the fire. The rest of you load the body into the wagon and hit for home."

He turned to the girl and older man. "You might as well go, too. Rawley and I'll be along as soon as we swing over to his camp and pick up his stuff."

HANK rolled a cigarette as the remainder of the party got together and moved slowly off. Mounted, he led the Double Bar E ramrod to his campsite. And the minute they pushed through the thicket covering the mouth of the draw, he knew he was in trouble, because when he turned in his saddle to face the man coming up behind, he found the dull gleam of metal in Kirk's hand. The Double Bar E foreman gigged his mount around to face him squarely.

By this time the moon had climbed high enough in the sky to send its light flooding into this cleft between two hills. They could see each other's faces clearly. On Kirk's Hank was relieved to see nothing worse than puzzlement and hard suspicion.

He could see red flames licking through the smoke

"Either you're on the dodge, or you know more about this than you've told!" charged Kirk flatly. "Which is it, Rawley?"

Hank told the literal truth. "I'm no owlhooter. I was hopin' to land a job on the Double Bar E—figured on reachin' there this afternoon. But my bronc picked up a stone and went lame. He's still tenderfooted, as you'd notice if we'd hit some

hard ground. Anyway, nursin' him along put me behind so it was night by the time I got this far. Not knowin' what kind of a reception I'd get ridin' into a strange place after dark, I decided to bed down until morning."

"And you didn't make a fire because you're bashful about bein' caught asleep?"

Hank gave him a straight look. "A lot of big outfits I've run up against don't like drifters camping on their range at night."

"On the cagy side, aren't you, Rawley?"

"It's a smart idea, at times. Just as I considered it smart to ease my hogleg out of the holster a minute ago, when I turned around." Hank lifted the nose of the weapon into sight. "Shall we play this hand out, Kirk, or deal a new one?" he inquired.

The following moment put a hard knot in his stomach. He had a swift, unnerving vision of a blast of gunfire wiping out in failure all he was being depended on to accomplish. Then Kirk let out a pent-up breath and holstered his gun.

"What reason have we got to drill each other?" he wanted to know. "Your story makes sense. I guess this woman-killin' has got me kind of jumpy."

There was sincerity in his voice. Hank sheathed his gun. "No hard feelings, Kirk." Realizing that a show of curiosity would be only natural, he went on, "What's it all about, anyway?"

Kirk's answer was slow. "It's a pretty long story, and I don't reckon I've got any right to pass it out. You'll learn all you need to know later. Gather up your blanket and warbag, and let's mosey."

Hank dismounted. It took only a moment to make his few belongings into a roll and tie it behind his saddle. As he did so, his black swung around, bringing his hind quarters closer to Kirk, causing the brand on his left hip to draw attention.

"That looks like a Ladder B," remarked the foreman. "Or is it a Ladder E?" He leaned forward, as though to see better.

"Right the first time." Hank swung half around, turning his stirrup to his toe. He caught a rustling sound, a sensation of a swift downward movement. Instinctively he ducked. A gun butt clipped the brim of his hat, and came down on his shoulder with force. Hank felt an excruciating pain, then numbness. At the same instant he involuntarily leaped back from the unexpected attack.

KIRK swore, and followed with a headlong plunge from his saddle which took them both to the ground. Hank managed to twist aside and escape having the wind smashed out of him. Still the power of Kirk's arms, coiling about his body, sent fear through him.

The numbness commenced to leave Hank's right shoulder. He got that arm free and drove his fist into the face of his assailant. Kirk's head bobbed, but he held on.

Desperation spurred Hank's struggles. His ribs seemed about to crack. Inability to breathe created an agony in his chest and sent a pound of blood to his brain that caused a red mist to swim before his eyes. In a moment he'd be helpless, a setup for a quick release and a follow-up punch that would smash him into oblivion.

Perhaps that was Kirk's strategy. Playing the hunch, Hank permitted his pounding right fist to sheer off. He let his body sag, and the ruse paid off. Kirk's embrace loosened and he reared back to his knees. Breath whistling through his teeth, he grabbed a handful of Hank's shirt front and yanked him up to a sitting posture, right fist drawn back for the knockout blow.

Hank flung himself aside with a force that pulled his shirt free of Kirk's grasp with a ripping sound. He rolled over to his knees and up to his feet as impetus took the Double Bar E ramrod to his knees.

Gulping air, Hank stooped and picked up a rock the size of his fist. He hurled it, aiming low, as Kirk scrambled to his feet. Caught in the belly by the missile, the later doubled over with a grunt of pain. Hank leaped forward, straightening him out with a right to the jaw that sent him heels over head. Following swiftly, he plucked the gun out of Kirk's holster and

tossed it aside. He did the same with his own weapon and cartridge belt.

Kirk shook his head. He was slow finding his feet, but he renewed the attack. They fought back and forth across the draw, and then Hank became aware of empty space behind him just in time to throw himself into a clinch. They wrestled briefly, teetering back and forth, only to plunge off the edge together. Though they fell no more than six feet, Hank landed underneath. He felt only a shock. Then blackness washed over him.

Coming out of it was like swimming through succeeding waves of muddy water. Alternately they cleared, giving him glimpses of light, then they enveloped him again. Choking, he came up for air, and opened his eyes to find that what had seemed like the buffeting of a swift current was in reality a hand shaking him.

"Come on, Rawley! Wake up! You're not hurt!"

THE FAMILIAR voice started a gathering of Hank's scattered wits. When the neck of a canteen was put to his lips, he drank deeply. Then he lay back, gradually grasping the situation. His face was not hurt much, but every inch of the rest of him felt bruised and sore. Apparently Kirk had been satisfied merely to have him knocked out for a while.

Hank sat upright. Both hands flashed to his waist, feeling for the moneybelt through his shirt. It was still there. Puzzled, he looked at the man who squatted on his heels close by, surveying him calmly.

"Maybe you'd better look in it," suggested Kirk. "Satisfy yourself that nothing's gone, so you and me can start out again on the level."

Hank eyed him narrowly. "You're telling me you examined those papers, and then put them back?"

Kirk shrugged. "They're none of my business. I don't care how many wills old man Ellender made out, or where they pop up from."

"Then why'd you jump me like that?"

"Because I figured searchin' you and your warbag would be the surest way to learn some of the truth about you. You seemed too smart a hairpin to be the ordinary drifter you claimed. Besides, even if you were nothing more and had been dragged into this by chance, you could still have picked up something you were holdin' back."

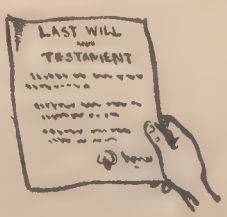
"Such as?"

"You were alone with the body after packin' it out of the fire. You'd have had time to make off with anything you found on it. And there's plenty of hombres who wouldn't balk at robbin' the dead, especially of something that might throw some big money their way later."

"You're talkin' about blackmail. That means you thought that dead woman was Joyce Ellender, the same as the rest. You figured she'd been murdered to dispose of Grant Ellender's last surprise will, too. Did you think there could be a chance the party who'd killed her didn't get what he was after?"

"When the stake is a million bucks, a lot of funny things can happen!"

Hank conceded that point. "I figured on easing my way into this setup until I



found someone I was sure I could trust. I reckon you're it." He held out his hand, and it was gripped hard. "Maybe the two of us, pullin' together, can plow through this mess," he said.

"How do you figure it?" inquired Kirk presently, as a sack of tobacco passed between them.

"Somebody made a big mistake."

"Yeah. And when he finds it out?"

"How do we know he hasn't already? When he searched through the dead woman's things, doesn't it seem that he must have found something to give away her real identity?"

"Then why the fire?" Kirk demanded.

"Probably to protect himself by destroying all evidences of murder having been done. If only a few charred bones were found in the ashes of the building, there'd be no proving how the person had died. Everything might be passed off as an accident. The way it stands now, of course, the killer will pull a blank face and pretend to believe the dead woman is Joyce Ellender. That would be the most natural assumption under the circumstances."

Hank shook his head somberly, and continued. "All we can be sure of is that we're up against someone with brains and nerve. It took plenty of guts and a damn good rider to jump a horse across that gully in the dark. Which one of the Ellender heirs would come up to that description, Kirk?"

The other countered with a question of his own. "You know how many there are —their names and where they fit into the family?"

Hank nodded. "The old man brought Joyce up to date on all that in the letter he sent along with the will. I'll know who you're talkin' about."

KIRK relighted a cigarette that had gone out. "All right. I've been on the Double Bar E for twenty years. Started out as a button, doin' chores. That's give me a chance to be pretty well acquainted with Brian and George, and George's daughter, Merle."

"The girl who was with you tonight?"

"No. That was a second granddaughter, Susan Ross. She's from Arizona. Lived on a ranch until a year or so ago, when her old man went broke and died. I reckon that's what made it natural for her to climb a horse and come along to help fight the fire. Merle's different, sort of delicate." A warmth pulsed suddenly in Kirk's voice. "She was born in England, lived most of her life there. And she's . . . well, you'll get what I mean when you meet her. But there's no use talkin' about the girls now. They couldn't have had anything to do with this killin'."

"Couldn't they? A woman could kill another woman that way, or even kill a man, if things broke right for her. And as for jumping that gully, there's women riders could do that, too!"

"That gully business lets Miss Merle out," spoke up Kirk quickly. "She's scared of horses—got throwed and hurt pretty bad when she was little. She hardly ever gets on one now, and then it's always old Baldy, a lazy, stove-up old plug that couldn't jump over a log."

"What about Susan Ross?"

"She could do it all right. She sets a saddle right pretty. But she just got here yesterday. She don't know the country, so how could she have found her way around after dark? Besides, she didn't have time to plan a murder."

"This one wasn't planned," opined Hank. "Nobody knew when Joyce would show up, so the killer's meeting with the woman he took to be Joyce Ellender had to be accidental."

"What about Brian?" queried Hank slowly. "How come he didn't turn out for the fire?"

"He stayed in town this afternoon. He likes his liquor and cards, and he's got pretty thick with Blackjack Henser, owner of the Lucky Star Saloon. I reckon Henser's got him lined up as a future sucker, buttering him up against the time he'll come into his share of the Old Man's money."

That added further complications. Brian would be provided with opportunity as well as motive. And a dangerous gambler-saloonkeeper, with a stake in the game of possible future spoils, could be added to the list of suspects. One of Henser's kind would want to make sure Brian got his inheritance. He wouldn't hesitate to set a henchman to stop the woman who would be bearing the will that might cut Brian out.

Hank swore, abruptly and with feeling. The deeper he probed, the more obscured the truth became.

(To be continued in the next issue)

He took hold of her wrist. "Let's go outside," he said to her roughly

I'm Warning You

By Giles A. Lutz

ANITA COLEMAN was aware of the sudden silence as she and Jim Trabor walked into the hall. She defiantly tossed her head. This dull, stodgy town never approved of anything she did. She took delight in the covert glances thrown her way—approving glances from the men, tight-lipped, frigid looks from the women.

The music started, and she curtsied to Jim at the caller's command. She dipped to the floor, knowing the low-cut neckline would start tongues wagging. Her eyes danced as she saw the color start in Jim's face. He glanced guiltily around, and almost missed the next movement of the dance.

She felt his fingers bite into her arm as he swung her. "I told you not to wear that dress," he said fiercely.

She laughed, and swung to meet the man on her left. Let Jim disapprove. She didn't

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RICK SET the right trap, but bagged the wrong victim

care. She passed on around the circle, swinging high, swinging low, and the dress billowed up and out from the floor, giving a flashing glimpse of trim ankles and lace-trimmed petticoat. She met Jim and promenaded back, and the devil in her eyes grew at the scowl on his face.

His lean good looks appealed to her, but she wished he weren't so serious. She knew what was in his thoughts, and she held him off at arm's length. She wasn't ready to settle down yet, she didn't want the dull business of making a home, of seeing her youth fade into the lean stringiness of other women. There was time for that in the future. Now she wanted to laugh and dance.

She was the liveliest figure on the floor, and her ankles twinkled at each whirl and turn of the dance. Her hair fell to her shoulders in shining, black waves, and when she threw back her head and laughed, the lights struck little red glints from it. Her eyes were deep, bordering on green, and she had a trick of veiling them with her long lashes, then suddenly looking at a man. She'd learned long ago it was always effective.

The music stopped, and she faced Jim, panting a little to catch her breath. The humor was gone from his face, and his eyes were sober. He took hold of her wrist. "Let's go outside," he said to her roughly.

She didn't like his tone, and she jerked her wrist free. "You're not wearing your badge now," she stormed.

People were watching them, and the deep, ingrained resistance in her welcomed their disapproval.

He said, "Anita. Please."

Her stubborness melted at his distress, and she felt a small shame. She didn't know why she delighted in tormenting him. She nodded and walked out ahead of him.

SHE LEANED against the side of the building, drinking in the night. The sky was a warm, dark cover, pierced with starlight, and the breeze caressed her face. She waited for him to say he understood, that what all those small people thought was of no importance. The longing was a surging tide, and if he'd have lifted his arms, she would have clung to him.

He said in a flat tone, "We have to live in this town. What good does it do to have them talking about you?"

"Let them talk," she said passionately. "I haven't done anything." Her words spilled out on the torrent of her anger. "They criticize everything I do."

He interrupted wearily, "And you like to give them reason. It's a good town, Anita. I want to live here. I'm running for sheriff next election. Jackson is ready to retire. I thought if I got it—" His words died lamely away at the uncompromising expression on her face.

She taunted scornfully, "A deputy who wants to be sheriff can't let himself be talked about."

He said, "I didn't come out here to argue with you, Anita. I wanted to tell you I heard Rick Dorn is back. Don't give them more reason to talk."

She felt the quick catch of her breath. Two years ago, Rick Dorn had fascinated her. He'd been wild and reckless, and his large, pale eyes had a physical touch as he'd looked at her. There had been a little fear mixed with that fascination, and she hadn't denied the appeal of that combination. Her thoughts were jumbled. Rick's back. Will he be changed—will I?

Jim studied her face. He said, "Ah," in a flat voice. "He was no good before he went to prison, Anita. His kind doesn't change. You were the only one in town who couldn't see it."

She retorted furiously, "You sent him to prison, and the town was glad to see him go. Wasn't that enough to satisfy you?"

Jim's voice was harsh. "I caught him stealing those cattle. He'd done other things he wasn't caught at. I just wanted to tell you, Anita, I'm not going to let him hang around town."

A soft, amused voice came out of the darkness. "How are you going to stop me, Trabor?"

Anita whirled, and Rick Dorn stepped into the light streaming from the doorway. Her hand went to her throat, and she felt the furious pumping of her blood. He was

thinner than she remembered, but that recklessness still rode his face. He drawled, "Hello, Anita," and grinned. She remembered those white, even teeth.

She reached a hand out to him.

He said woefully, "I been listening to Trabor. It looks as if I ain't wanted here at all."

She knew he was mocking both her and Jim, and she anxiously studied his face.

"All I thought about was you, Anita. I just want a chance to settle down near you."

His teeth showed in that smile, and the uneasiness left her.

Jim said savagely, "Get out of town, Dorn. I'm warning you."

"And if I don't?" Rick asked mockingly.

Fury broke across Jim's face. "All right, Dorn," he snapped. "You sure asked for it."

He sprang forward and planted his fist on Rick's nose. The blow knocked Rick backward, and the quick spurt of blood stained his lips and chin.

Anita screamed, her voice cutting through the music inside the building. She heard the sound of running feet as she cried, "Jim, don't!"

Rick raised a hand to his bloody nose. He stared at the red on his hand, then said softly, "Damn you, Trabor."

He moved in with quick, light steps. She saw his fists flash out, saw Jim's head bob back, and heard his grunt.

PEOPLE poured out of the building and formed a rough circle around the fighting men. "Smash him, Jim," someone yelled, and the cry was picked up around the circle. Anita felt anger and revulsion. Rick was alone, and everyone wanted to see Jim batter him to the ground. No, not everyone. Her voice rose above the other sounds. "He started this, Rick. He started it."

Jim flashed her a strained glance, and the hurt on his face wasn't caused by Rick's fists. He made a mistake in looking away, for Rick's fists slashed at his features.

Jim backed a few steps, shaking his head. He stopped on widely planted legs, and took three rapid blows before he could break Rick's charge. Then he smashed a hard fist into Rick's face, knocking him backward. "Come on, Rick," he muttered. "Come on." His face was oddly intent under its covering of blood.

Rick's grin was gone, and his eyes were wild. He sprang forward, and the two men struggled with locked arms. Their hoarse, strained breathing was punctuated now and then with little grunts. Anita saw Rick's foot work around behind Jim's leg, saw him raise it, and kick savagely downward. The boot-heel spur ripped cloth, and she saw Jim's face twist with the rush of pain.

The leg buckled under him, and Rick pushed him away and bounded back. Jim went down, landing on his back, and Rick jumped at him, boot heels aimed for Jim's defenseless face.

Jim rolled from under that descending weight. A boot heel grazed his shoulder, sliding off and thumping into the ground, and Rick stumbled, almost going down. His momentum carried him beyond Jim, and Jim scrambled to his knees. Jim dived forward, his shoulders catching Rick behind the knees and driving through. Rick spilled forward, his hands raking at the empty air.

It gave Jim time to get his feet under him. Anita saw him stagger, then he stood stiff-legged, drawing heavily on his pumping lungs. One eye was almost closed by the swelling knot beneath it.

"Stop it," she moaned. "Stop it." Her voice was lost in the savage outcries from the crowd.

Jim took an unsteady step and lashed out, hitting Rick on the jaw. Rick's head rocked back, and his lips parted in a grimace. Slowly, he toppled forward. He lit on his face, the dust puffing upward in little clouds. He rolled partially over and lifted his head. He stared up at Jim with glazing eyes. He said brokenly, "Trabor, I'll kill you for this." A gusty sigh ran through him, his eyes shut, and his head fell back into the dust.

Jim stood on unsteady legs, and Anita

heard the harsh sound of his labored breathing.

Anita dropped to her knees and pulled Rick's bloody head onto her lap. She looked up at Jim with blazing eyes. "I hate you," she said furiously. "I hate you."

He stared at her, his face emotionless. He said flatly, "Tell him to get out of town, Anita."

He turned and pushed through the crowd, and she had a curious lost feeling. She stared defiantly at the crowd, and they turned and drifted back into the building. She dabbed at Rick's face with her handkerchief.

HE STIRRED and moaned. Looking at his battered features, she felt a kindred feeling for him. It was awful to be alone, it was awful to fight an entire town by yourself. He opened his eyes, and for a moment there was no comprehension in them.

She said softly, "It's all right, Rick. It's all right."

He pushed her away and staggered to his feet. He swiped a hand across broken lips, and his eyes glittered. He looked around again and muttered, "He's gone."

She said frantically, "Don't look for him, Rick. Don't try to fight him again. Everyone's behind him, and—" Her words faltered before the steady probing of his eyes.

"Are you?"

"No," she said hesitantly. "No."

"I came back only to see you, Anita." He reached out and caught her hand. "I made a mistake," he went on, his eyes fixed on her face with that intent stare. "I paid for it. But they won't let me live it down."

He looked young and defenseless, and it touched her heart. Everyone in that crowd had been against him, and her sympathy rose in a warm, rich flood. She touched his cheek with her free hand.

"I'm not like the rest of them," she said softly.

She thought he was going to take her in his arms, and she didn't know whether she would've welcomed it or not. He said hesitantly, "I was going to ask you to ride with me in the morning. But they'll see you. They'll talk."

She tossed her head. "Let them talk." Those were the same words she'd used to Jim, and she wondered why their ring sounded a little weak.

"In the morning," he said and turned away.

She watched the shadows swallow him and resisted the impulse to call out to him. She felt strangely limp, and tears were near the surface. She remembered the slow, unfriendly glance Jim had given her. She didn't know whether the tears were for herself or for Rick.

She spent a sleepless night, the thoughts pounding in her head. I'm not wrong, she said over and over. They're the ones who're wrong. She kept seeing Jim's level, weighing eyes. She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow, and those eyes still measured her.

SHE DIDN'T feel like riding in the morning. She wondered if she could beg off, and the thought of Rick's hurt eyes made her shake her head. No matter what she said, he would think that the night had made her see things differently.

She went down to breakfast and toyed with her food. Her father glanced sharply at her several times. She was glad when he hurried off to his store.

Her horse was saddled, and she was waiting when Rick rode up. He greeted her gaily, and the fears of the night faded under his cheerfulness. His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

She knew the thin, white blouse was effective above the fringed riding-skirt. She laughed at the admiration in his eyes. Jim would have been worrying about what other people thought. For a moment the thought dampened her enthusiasm.

Rick helped her into the saddle, and his hand held her elbow a long moment. His touch sent little tingles through her, and she looked down into his face. She saw the battered marks of last night's fight and said fiercely, "He hurt you, didn't he?"

Rick grinned. "A little. He thought he

was doing what he had to. I ain't blaming him."

She had the feeling his grin didn't extend to his eyes, but he turned away before she could be sure. He swung up into his saddle, and she noticed the bedroll strapped behind the cantle. Her eyes widened at the sight of the bulging saddle-bags, the rifle in its scabbard, the gun strapped around his waist.

He said soberly, "I have to carry everything with me, Anita. I have no place to leave things." That lonely, lost note was in his voice. He looked at her and said quickly, "Don't you worry about me, Anita. I'll get along."

He would, she thought fiercely, if Jim and the rest of them would let him alone. She remembered Jim's words, "Tell him to get out of town, Anita."

She rode beside Rick straight-shouldered and proud, and she didn't care who might be looking. He headed quickly out of town, and her relief was mixed with disappointment. He acted as though the fewer who saw them the better. He seemed to relax only when the town faded.

The morning sun rode higher, and Anita felt the beads of perspiration on her upper lip. She would've preferred riding the other way, and she wondered at Rick's choosing this direction. This was toward the desert, desolate and lonely country, with the sun-baked rocks adding to its ugliness.

She reined up and said, "Rick, I'm thirsty."

He grinned at her as he handed the canteen across. She had a queer feeling his grin lacked the warmth of a few hours ago, that it had a chilling, feral quality about it.

The water was hot and brackish. She thought of the cool springs that lay in the hills behind them, and it added to the tide of uneasiness building within her. She said, "I'm tired, Rick. Let's turn back."

THE GLITTER in his eyes made his face seem sharper. "I want to show you something, Anita. You've never seen Dead Man's Cave in Lost Canyon. We're only a few miles from it."

She didn't want to see it, she didn't like the sound of the name. She was shaking her head, when he said, "Come on, Anita."

It sounded like a command, and the resistance leaped up within her. She started to refuse, but she was too hot and tired to make an issue of it. He'd said a few miles. She'd ride that far with him, then insist that they turn back.

They entered the canyon, and its walls rose in sheer, rocky faces above her. The brassy, hot glare of the sun bounced off those walls, searing her eyeballs. She shut her eyes against the glare, listening to the monotonous click of the horses' hoofs against the rocky floor.

"He always insists on using his own saddle."

Rick said, "There, Anita," and she opened her eyes. The mouth of the cave was only a dozen feet over their heads, and its shadowy interior beckoned irrisistibly. She scrambled off her horse, and Rick called, "I'll be right along."

She clawed her way up the slope, pausing for breath on the broad shelf before the cave's mouth. She looked upward, and it made her dizzy. There was a narrow ledge above the cave, and then the rocky wall rose sharply with no discernible break in it. She stepped inside, feeling the coolness close around her. She wearily sank down against one wall of the cave, closed her eyes, and let her mind drift.

She opened her eyes at the sound of Rick's approach. He stood at the mouth of the cave, his figure sharply outlined against the brilliant glare behind him. He carried his rifle and the saddle-bags, and she wondered why he'd bothered.

He grinned and said, "I took the horses down the canyon a way. I found some shade for them." He set the rifle down and walked toward her.

She stood up and said, "Rick, let's go back."

He lazily put his feet under him and moved between her and the entrance. He asked mockingly, "Aren't you happy with me?"

The glitter was more pronounced in his eyes. "Why, yes," she said and faltered.

He moved toward her, and she backed a step. "We're not going back, Anita. We're never going back."

"Rick," she said sharply. "Rick, you're crazy!"

"Am I?" he asked huskily, and reached out for her.

She struggled against the strength of his arms. A forearm pressed against the small of her back, bending her cruelly forward, and his hard mouth savagely sought hers. She fought until the strength drained out of her, then went limp in his arms. He'd kissed her a few times before he'd been sent away, but those kisses weren't like this one. They hadn't contained that animal hunger, and the heat of it filled her with terror.

He pushed her away and said, "Now do you want to go back?"

She pressed her hand to her bruised lips. She had to fight to keep her shaking from showing in her voice. She thought of her father, of that fussy, little man preoccupied with the affairs of his store. She thought of the neighbors she knew, and of Jim Trabor. She said steadily, "I'm going back."

FURY made his face sharper, and the glow in his eyes had a red tinge. "Stop it," he said harshly. "Do you think you can go back now? They saw you stand up for me last night; you rode away with me this morning. They wouldn't let you live there again."

He swore savagely at the town, at the people who lived in it. He blamed them for everything that'd happened to him. She'd never seen this Rick Dorn before. This man was insane.

She felt weak and sick inside, but she took a forward step, and she tried to make it strong and determined. Once she'd been able to handle Rick Dorn, once she'd had a power over him. She prayed it wasn't all gone.

"All right, Rick," she said calmly. "I'm going back now."

He watched with tight, narrowed eyes until she reached him, and then he grabbed for her. She knocked his hands down and slapped him hard. For a moment, the surprise held him motionless, then he leaped for her. His hands clawed at her shoulders, and she heard the rip of cloth. She thought he was going to tear the blouse from her, then he crashed the back of his hand into her mouth.

It knocked her back into the cave, her knees buckled, and she fell. Her eyes swam with pain, and for an instant, she couldn't see him plainly. His snarling face slowly came into focus.

"So you didn't mean any of the things you said. You were showing off for them. I'll teach you to mean them, when I've got more time." His eyes rested hungrily on her bare shoulder, and she gathered the torn cloth around her.

"You said you hated Trabor last night," he shouted. His teeth bared in a wolfish grin. "You'll see him before we go on. He'll be coming here after you."

He saw the incredulity on her face and said, "Do you think I'd forgotten he sent me to prison? Do you think I'd let him get away with that beating last night? I gave a kid a dollar to deliver a note to him a couple of hours after we left. I told Trabor we'd be here, if he wanted to come after you."

Her throat was dry and aching. She cried, "He won't come alone. He'll bring men with him."

"Not him," Rick said, and the ugly

triumph was a red glow in his eyes. "He won't want the town thinking you rode out here with me. He'll try to hide it. He'll be by himself."

She remembered how Jim worried about the town's opinion of her. Rick was right. Jim would come alone.

Rick walked to the cave's entrance and picked up the rifle. He'd chosen his spot well. The bare floor of the canyon offered no cover, no protection. She couldn't even call a warning to Jim. The rifle would reach farther than her voice.

She got to her feet and made a frantic rush toward the entrance. She had to get out of this cave, she had to run down the canyon and warn Jim.

Rick whirled, and swept out an arm, hitting her cruelly. The blow knocked her backward, and the rocky floor slammed into her knees. Her head swam, and she tasted blood in her mouth.

Rick stood over her. "You try that again," he snarled, "and I'll break your damned neck."

He turned back to the cave's mouth, picked up his rifle, and lay down.

THOUGHTS clawed at her mind with cruel fingers. She saw all the things Jim had tried to tell her—but it was too late. She looked frantically around for a weapon, and there was nothing. Her fingers scraped at the floor until they were raw. There wasn't even a loose rock she might throw. She tried to get stealthily to her feet, but Rick heard her. She sank back under the malignant glare of his eyes.

Time wore on endlessly, picking at her raw nerve ends. She watched Rick with horror-widened eyes, and there were moments when she thought she'd lose her mind.

Rick muttered and swore, and she caught fragments of his words. "—not coming. The yellow cur—"

She knew relief, and at the same time a great disappointment. Jim hadn't cared enough to come after her.

A small stream of pebbles and dirt flowed down across the cave's mouth, then a small bush hung lazily before the entrance, then sank out of sight. She heard a small thump on the ledge above the cave, and her heart jammed up into her mouth.

Rick's head tilted upward, a startled, wondering look on his face. He dropped his rifle and jerked out his sixgun. "It's Trabor," he yelled. "He came down the canyon wall."

Jim had out-thought Rick. He'd ridden along the rim of the canyon and worked his way down that sheer face to the ledge above the cave. She called, "Jim, Jim," and Rick threw a murderous glance at her before he jerked his attention back to the ledge. She saw him suddenly raise his gun and fire, and her breath almost stopped.

Her hopes revived as silence settled back after the roar of the gun. Rick had missed. She stared with fascinated eyes at the red drops that fell across the cave's entrance. She saw them puddle on the shelf before the cave. It was blood—Rick hadn't missed.

Rick yelled, "Got him!" and she screamed. She got to her feet and moved forward, and Rick's attention was all on the ledge above him. His gun hand moved, and another shot filled the cave with its booming reverberations. She heard the shrill *wheeee* of the bullet as it ricocheted off into space.

"I saw you move, Trabor," Rick shouted. "Come off that ledge, damn you!"

She couldn't stand it any longer. Jim must still be alive, Rick had seen him move. "Jim," she called. "Jim."

Rick's hand clamped around her wrist. He was back under that protecting ledge, Jim couldn't get a shot at him. The silence fell again, more frightening than the gun's noise.

"Trabor, you hear me?" Rick yelled. "You'll really hear her scream. Did you ever see how a gun-sight can rip a cheek?"

He raised the gun muzzle, and Anita shrank back from him.

"You coming, Trabor?"

"I'm coming," Jim said, and his voice was fuzzy with pain.

"No, Jim, no," she moaned. When he dropped down onto that shelf, he'd be completely defenseless, he wouldn't have

a chance. Rick's face was turned upward again, and he dropped her wrist. She gathered her fading strength and rushed forward. Her head and shoulder caught Rick in the side, and she thought her neck would break under the hard, bruising impact.

RICK grunted as the impact drove him forward onto the shelf before the cave. He stumbled and almost went down, and his arms waved wildly as he tried to catch his balance. Anita was down on her knees. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. She heard the deep report of a gun, and for a moment thought Rick had fired again. But Rick was staggering backward, his right shoulder covered by a spreading red stain. His face was a doughy grey, his features set in a mask of pain and hatred. He dropped his gun, stumbled backward a few steps, and fell.

She saw Jim's form flash across the cave's mouth. He lit on his feet, and the force of his drop beat him to his knees. He sprawled forward on his face, and she heard his muffled groan. He tried to raise his body, but his left arm hung useless.

Rick was crawling toward his gun, making odd, animal-like noises in his throat.

She shouted a warning.

Jim raised his head, and she saw him look dully about him. His eyes focused on Rick, and his face set with laborious determination. He pushed himself to a sitting position, his gun lifted, and he fired just as the fingers of Rick's left hand closed around his gun-butt.

The boom of the gun rocked and rolled through the cave. As the smoke cleared, Anita saw Rick spilling forward onto his face. He rolled himself partially over, then the last effort drained from him. His head fell back, and his eyes glazed. She saw the grim set of his lips above the hole in his throat.

Jim's gun dropped from his hand. He clasped his left arm, his face haggard.

She ran toward him. "Jim," she moaned. "Can you ever forgive me?"

He said gently, "It's all over, Anita. I couldn't just ride down the canyon to him. It took me a long time to work down that wall. Then that bush pulled out, and my surprise was gone." He grinned, and a little color returned to his face. "That ledge was kind of narrow. He got me through the arm." He said puzzledly, "I was ready to drop and take my chances. I can't understand him giving me a shot at him."

"I pushed him, Jim. If he'd killed you, I'd have died."

He stared at her, and all her answers and thoughts were in her eyes. His good arm went around her, and his lips sought hers. There was a hunger in them, too, but it was a different hunger. It had its demands, but there was warmth and protection in it.

She suddenly wanted to get back to that town. She'd never dislike it again—not as long as he was there.

Paramount's Newest Western

THE EAGLE AND THE HAWK

will be reviewed in the next issue. It took 40 tons of movie equipment and a cast of 93 to make this spectacular Technicolor Western starring

John Payne . . . Rhonda Fleming . . . Dennis O'Keefe

Read about it in

RANCH FLICKER TALK

The Kid Takes a Wife

By Clyde Harper

"Drop the gun, or I'll cut you in two," she said coldly

HE PUT the receiver back on its hook, and turned dourly from the wall phone. Glancing across the kitchen, he said, "Adolph! Come out of that pantry. Ain't no mice in there."

But the spreckled tail slipped on around the jamb, and the old-timer muttered to himself, "Married! The Kid's gone and got married."

He sat down at the table, and stared bleakly through the back screen. I reckon, he thought, that's why he stayed two weeks. He knew when he left he was going to ask her. I should have figured it when we built that gear room . . . thought it funny he wanted one so big. Know now he meant it for a bedroom. Just boxed it up, to finish later, after she got here to see it.

The telephone rang—a long and three

IT TOOK ADOLPH, the snake, to uncoil the twists in a losing fight

shorts. He arose and lifted the receiver. "Hello. Oh, hello, Amanda. Yep, that was Davey. Just got back, and he's married! Now ain't that a heck of a note!"

Darn party lines anyhow. Everybody probably listened in when the Kid called from town. It would be all over the flats in an hour. They'd all know about it before the kid even got home.

Aloud, he said, "Yep, in about two hours. Come on over if you must, but I can straighten up. Adolph? In the pantry right now. Huh? Oh, all right, by the time you get here. Seems like a lot of trouble that ain't necessary, to me."

He replaced the receiver with an irritated growl. He had to clean up for the new bride. Wasn't here yet, and already she was causing trouble. He thought there'd be trouble enough without her, if the Parkinsons went through with their threat.

While the water was heating for a shave, he placed chairs around right, picked up old papers. In the room where he and the Kid slept, he put away his clothes and made his bed.

The water was hot, so he shaved off the stubble, grinning as he remembered the Kid's first shave.

He put away his razor and mug, and emptied the pan out the back door. It was almost time for Amanda to arrive, so he went to the pantry.

"You've gotta go to your box," the old-timer said to Adolph. "Amanda don't want you around." But Adolph wasn't in the pantry. He had come out and was under the stove. The old-timer squatted and picked him up by the neck. He thought, suddenly, "What if the Kid's wife don't want you around, either?"

IN LESS than an hour Amanda Kirsting arrived. With practiced hand she swung the team to place them in the shade, yet near enough to the hitch-rail so that the gee-horse could be tied.

She was broad and angular, had a ready tongue, and vigor that seemed inexhaustible. She had buried her husband nine years ago, soon after they moved into the flats. Most women would have quit and gone back east, confronted with an undeveloped homestead and two small sons—but not Amanda Kirsting.

She'd been reared on a hill farm back east, so she put her knowledge to work. She raised chickens and turkeys, planted a truck garden, and managed for a cow or two. She traded the heavy wagon they'd come west in for a buckboard, and carried her products into town to sell. Pretty soon she was doing all right. When the party line came she made sales by phone, which gave her more time to increase production. But she was never too busy to sit with the sick, help with a new baby, or give comfort when tragedy struck.

"Howdy, Amanda. Get down and come in," the old-timer said.

She alighted with agility, and gathered broom, mop and pail from the back of the rig.

"Bring the box," she said. "Some things she'll need." At the front door she remembered, and turned: "Where's Adolph?"

"In his box out back, just like you said. He wouldn't bother you if he was loose." He thought, She can out-work most men, but she's still got a squeamish side.

He put the box on the kitchen table. It contained freshly homebaked bread, a dressed fat fryer, eggs, and vegetables from Amanda's big garden. The old-timer brightened as he saw the chicken. He hoped Amanda would cook supper. He could envision only burned-chicken calamity if the Kid's city wife tried to tackle the range.

"Ain't too bad," Amanda curtly appraised the house. "But still needs some cleaning for a new bride to see."

She doffed bonnet and jacket, and muscular arms went into action. She stacked away dishes, put away pans, and took up the mop to start scrubbing.

She said, "We'll have a chivari Saturday night. The neighbors will all want to meet the new bride. I'll call those who have phones, but you'll have to take word to the others."

The old-timer grunted, and went to sit on the front porch. He wondered if they'd invite the Parkinsons.

He rolled a cigarette, which he closed

without licking, and struck a match on his boot heel. He inhaled slowly and looked across the flats, to see if he could catch the Kid's dust sign. He wanted to see it, but dreaded it, too. Her coming could bring nothing but grief, and he hated to see the Kid get hurt.

A city-raised gal just didn't fit in the flats; it took the tough, strong kind like Amanda. She'd been swayed by the thrill of a home on a ranch, and the romance of the colorful West. She didn't know about the dust and wind, and the heat that baked everything dry and brittle, or the flash floods that came in the rainy season, and ruthlessly crushed anything caught in their path.

She'd fight it a while, trying to beat back the desert. Then, gradually, she would begin to lose. It would come to the point where she could stand it no longer, and would tell the Kid she was leaving. The Kid couldn't leave any more than she could stay, and the rest of his life could be ruined.

With an irritated flick, the old-timer tossed away his cigarette, and muttered a soft-growled curse.

IT WAS Amanda who saw them. He was a little vexed that he hadn't seen them first, but they were jogging along, not raising much sign. Two horses, two riders, just jogging along. Seeing her riding a horse instead of a rig, he wondered if she'd be able to walk tomorrow. The old-timer said nothing as he waited for them to arrive.

Amanda couldn't wait on the porch. She went out to the hitch-rail to meet them. The old-timer ambled out behind her.

A hundred yards away they touched up their mounts, and came on to the house in a trot. Amanda was laughing and babbling, and went to help her dismount. It was easy to see that Amanda approved of the Kid's new bride.

She was a trim little thing. She had looks all right, in both face and figure. It was easy to see why the Kid had fallen. He was beaming like the day he got his first pony.

He said, as he matched the Kid's firm grip, "Hello, Davey. Sure glad you're back. Amanda came over to sort of straighten around."

The Kid said softly, proudly, "Mary Ann, this is my dad."

She came to him slowly, but her level gaze was unafraid. Impulsively she caught his work-callused hand, and the pressure she gave it was warm and sincere.

"I . . . I hope you won't hate me for loving him, too," she said as she met his stare.

"I don't think I will," the old-timer stuttered.

She stepped away to Davey's side, and the old-timer was thankful when Amanda called, "Dan Yancey, come help me undo their things. Davey, you two go ahead in. Dan and I will bring your bags."

A bag was lashed behind each cantle, and extra bundles were tied to pommels. The old-timer removed Davey's, and Amanda removed those of Mary Ann. The old-timer thought Mary Ann Yancey wasn't such a bad name. The initials spell M-A-Y. He gave such a start that the horse shied away. It couldn't be possible, but it was—M-A-Y, the name of Davey's dead mother.

Dan Yancey's knees grew weak, and his throat became tight. A chill chased along his back, as if an icy finger had raked his spine. He held to the pommel for a moment and shook his head.

From beside the other horse, Amanda called softly, "Now, ain't that cute. Davey's carrying her across the threshold."

AMANDA took them into the kitchen, and Davey came over to his father. They were of the same height, big-boned, sinewy, and strong. Desert heat had baked off all superfluous flesh, and the sun had tanned them dark. One was superb in virile young manhood; the other stooped slightly from the labor of years that had brought grey to his once-dark, thick thatch.

"I sent word to the Mallotta boys," said Davey at length, "to be out early tomorrow. We'll finish the room Mary Ann and I'll take. We figured you'd want to keep the other."

The old-timer nodded absently. He thought, "The Kid's told her about May,

about the short time we were together." It was almost thirty years since they'd come to the desert, a young married couple come to the West to make their fortune. They'd built this house with their own hands, mixing and laying the 'dobe, bucksawing rafters and boards for the roof and sills and planking for the floor. Hardly stopping to eat and not wanting to sleep, they were so anxious to get it done.

Dan Yancey smiled as he remembered the day that he, too, had carried his young wife across the threshold. That had been a momentous occasion, almost as big as when Davey was born, a year later. Money came hard those days, so they'd paid the doctor in chickens and eggs raised from the small flock brought with them. It had been pretty tough the first few years, but a man who was willing could find work. A day's work here and there was traded for food or better tools with which to build sheds. But they had had lots of fun as they counted their pennies, and had cut corners to make ends meet.

Then the railroad came through, and there was a scraper job for the stout-hearted team that had brought them west. Each payday there was money for the fund May kept. Then came the day when they had sufficient, in addition to enough for a year's supplies. They hitched the team to the wagon, and May went with him to buy the stock, with Davey at their feet in his washtub cradle. Just a young range bull and five young cows was their herd, that day.

They were full of plans as they retired that night, and May named it the Double D, for Dan and Davey. She kissed him as she told him how happy she was, with a husband, a home, a son, and a ranch.

Two weeks later she was dead, killed by a bull-rattler bite.

The old-timer slumped as he remembered that day, and the next few that followed. A Mexican family lived ten miles away—the Mallotta boys and their mother. He had gone to them for help, astride one of the horses, with Davey in his arms. But the long ride was useless.

They buried her next morning in a crude box the boys built, their mother saying a service in her soft-spoken Spanish. She stayed on to take care of Davey, and the boys did his chores. Dan just sat around for a day or two, like a man awfully sick. Then one evening he went to her grave, and it was late when he came to bed. The next morning he was ready for work.

"I'll carry on the way you'd want me," he had told May as he sat beside her. "I'll raise our son, and I'll build our ranch, just the way that we had planned."

In the years that followed, Dan Yancey worked with a vigor that knew no respite. The Mallotta boys were hired as the amount of work increased. Their mother took care of Davey until he was big enough to ride and wait on himself. Then he came to live with Dan. Dan taught him to write, to figure and read, house chores, and how to work cattle. Gradually he let Davey make the business decisions, and very few of them were wrong.

They expanded steadily, in acreage and herd, and improved their land as they did. They built water-trap dams to catch the rains, which reduced erosion and gave better grass. Three years ago Davey decided on sinking windmill wells to draw up water so the herds could always drink. That year they put down two in the south flats, last year two more in the center. This year, just before Davey left on the cattle train north, they had put two in the north part of the valley. These two had caused repercussion.

The old-timer wondered, with a sudden, wry grin, if he could lick Gabe Parkinson.

DAN SAID, "Do all right with the cattle?"

"We'll net about four thousand," said Davey. "That's almost twelve thousand this year. Of course we still owe some on the two north wells."

"They may give us a little trouble, Davey."

"They're not going dry?"

"No," said Dan Yancey gravely. "It's the Parkinsons. They claim we're drawing the water down in their tank. Said we had to move the wells farther south. Came by a

few days after you'd gone, gave us two weeks to do it. Yesterday was the last day. Be careful when you ride about. They're probably just talking, but you never can tell, especially about a fellow like Pinkie."

In the kitchen, Amanda had overheard, frowning as she did. Mary Ann was at the back door, looking at the barns, corrals, out-buildings, and the view west to the mountains. She had not overheard. Amanda thought, startled, "So that's why the shotgun is loaded!"

"I've got to be going," Amanda said aloud. "It's about time for the boys to get in from school, hungry as two young bears."

Mary Ann turned from the door, her face softly aglow.

"Oh, I love it here," she said, and Amanda understandingly patted her hand. Already the flats had captivated Mary Ann.

The old-timer said, with fried chicken in mind: "Better stay for supper, Amanda. We can phone the boys to come over."

But Amanda shook her head. "They've got chores to do. But they'll be fit to be tied when they hear about you, Mary Ann, and you can just bet your boots they'll be here early Saturday. Arlie is the one with a front tooth out; had his first fight last week. Struts around like he'd won a medal. Charlie is mad with envy. I'm expecting him in any evening with his tooth knocked out, just to keep up with Arlie. I declare, with two ten-year-olds around, there's never a moment's peace."

They walked out with her to the buckboard.

"The Mallotta boys will be over early tomorrow," Davey told her, as Dan untied the team. "We'll finish up the room by night. We bought some furniture in town today which will be sent out tomorrow, along with Mary Ann's things that we brought on the train. So it would be right nice if you could come over Saturday and help Mary Ann get settled. Dad and me will have to ride around that day to see how the ranch is doing."

Amanda thought he meant they were going to see the Parkinsons. She told Mary Ann, "Why, I'd love to, honey, if I can be of help."

"Oh, you can, so very much. Come over and spend the whole day. We'll straighten up and fix lunch, and have a good visit. There's just dozens of ways I'll need your advice."

"I'll be here, then," Amanda said, and started the team. She waved and the team trotted off briskly. It would take her almost an hour to reach home.

BACK INSIDE, Dan said, "I'll take a bedroll and bunk in the barn. You use the bedroom until your room is ready."

"Mary Ann's way ahead of you," grinned Davey. "Wants to sleep under the stars to see if they're the same as in Kansas. If it gets too chilly we can sneak into the barn."

"Kansas?" the old-timer said, curiously.

"I lived near Dodge City most of my life," Mary Ann explained. "Dad was foreman for the Bar J, and I've spent many a night on the range. He was killed in an accident five years ago, and Mother and I went to Chicago to live with her sister. I got a job at the stockyards, where Davey met me two years ago, although you'd never have known he saw me. I almost fainted when I got his first letter, even if it was just a few words of thanks for the service we'd given. That's the way it all started."

The old-timer nodded. Dodge City, he thought. Then she knows all about wind, and dust, and ranching.

He said, glancing around the room: "You may want to make some changes. Put curtains on the windows, change things around. Did Davey mention the axe?"

Mary Ann nodded, gravely. "It stays where you want it. As for curtains, you don't know how much you miss the sun after having it most of your life, until you're cooped up in the city."

"We'll make it," said Davey, "for we all like the same things."

The old-timer said, "There's two things I'd better tell you. One is, the shotgun's loaded if varmints come prowling around. The other is . . . outside."

He beckoned her though the kitchen. Davey followed, amusement in his eyes.

Outside, the old-timer indicated a box off

to one side against the kitchen wall, where the warm afternoon sun struck it. The box was about four feet long, a foot in width and height, with ends, sides and bottom of lumber. The top was of chicken wire, tacked on tightly except for one corner, which was drawn down and hooked over a nail.

"This," said Dan, "is Adolph."

He unhooked the wire and lifted it back. Almost instantly a dark brown head poked up, and Adolph came out of his box. He was a full-grown bullsnake; as thick as a man's forearm, and longer than most men are tall.

He crawled out lazily and coiled loosely near Dan Yancey's feet, head raised a few inches, his sharp tongue flicking out inquiringly.

"He sort of adopted us about two years ago," Dan Yancey said, "and there ain't a rat or a mouse on the place. He ain't got no fangs, so he can't bite you."

"He can startle you, though," said Davey, "by crawling around your feet when you're eating, or climbing into your lap when you're reading."

"I imagine that *would* give you a start," said Mary Ann.

"It's just body warmth he's after," Dan Yancey said quickly, "when it gets cool at night, or when fall and winter come on."

Davey gave a soft chuckle. "You can save your breath. He doesn't have to go. Of course, we ain't hankering for Adolph to sleep with us, or make a necktie around our necks like he sometimes does with you. But Mary Ann ain't overly scared of snakes, especially the harmless kind. She was raised where they have both kinds; she knows the good from the bad."

"I'd rather have Adolph than rats and mice," was Mary Ann's comment. "Well, it's getting late. I'd better start supper. I can't wait to try the range. It's just like the one Mother had in Kansas."

The old-timer was silent as they moved away—Mary Ann to start supper, and Davey to care for the horses they'd rented in town to ride out. Dan nudged Adolph with his boot, and muttered, "Now ain't that a hell of a note! She can ride, she knows ranching, she ain't scared of you, and I'll bet my arm she's a darn good cook. Yep, May would have liked her too."

INSIDE the kitchen the telephone shrilled, and Mary Ann took down the receiver. Over the line came Amanda Kirsting's agitated voice, high-strung, excited, scared.

"Mary Ann? Have they got there yet? It's the Parkinson boys. Pinkie's drunk, and they're coming for a showdown about those north wells. I passed them just about halfway home, and hurried on to phone you. I was sure they'd be there by now. Tell Davey and Dan to watch Pinkie. I think he's carrying a gun."

Mary Ann replaced the receiver with a hand that shook. She had to warn them. She gathered strength into her body, and hurried for the back door.

But a shadow moved across it, and then another. Two horses stopped close to Dan Yancey, one on either side. The Parkinsons had arrived. The smaller one was grim and silent, the other reeling in the saddle, reddish-bearded lips in a snarl, one hand near his unbuttoned shirt front.

Mary Ann turned back from the door, thoroughly frightened.

The old-timer grew taut as hoofs crunched around the house. He thrust Adolph back into his box, and turned around to face them. He knew the shotgun was too damn far away.

He said coldly, "You both can get the hell out of here!"

Pinkie's answer was equally cold. "You think we was kiddin' about them damn wells? We've come to show you we weren't." Pinkie's hand darted inside his shirt, came out holding a gun. He leaned and chopped down with it, a hard, skull-crushing blow—if it had landed solidly.

But Pinkie's horse had shied. The old-timer hadn't had time to fasten down the wire corner, and Adolph decided to come out again. The horse saw him and shied, and Pinkie's aim was off.

The gun barrel drew blood from Dan Yancey's scalp, and his ear and neck were bruised. With an angry roar he grappled for the weapon. As they struggled, the gun went off. Then, savagely, Pinkie knocked

him loose, and Dan Yancey lost his balance and fell.

"That'll teach you we ain't foolin'," rasped Pinkie, and he lifted his gun to fire. "The only good snake is a dead one."

But from behind a gun roared, so close that hot wadding stung horses' flanks, and the air overhead was angrily churned by shot.

"Drop it, or I'll cut you in two," Mary Ann said coldly, shotgun unwavering.

Pinkie flung a quick glance over his shoulder. He stiffened as he stared into the muzzle. The whiskey tinge in his cheeks gave way to pallor. He dropped the sixgun as if it were molten hot.

Dan Yancey sat up and fingered his scalp. Davey came running from the barn. At once he understood, and anger drained his face white. He jerked up the sixgun. His hot stare bit at Pinkie, then swept on to Gabe. The small man motioned vaguely, as if pushing away their anger.

"I don't want no trouble, Davey. I tried to keep him from coming. It ain't your wells making our tank go dry. They're almost two miles down below the fence, and our tank's a mile above. Unload his gun and give it to me. I don't reckon we'll bother you again."

Davey fought to control his anger, as he looked at Dan's cut scalp. He said, his voice controlled but taut, "All surface water's been going to underground streams the past few years. That's why we sunk the wells. If you're smart, you'll do the same."

He walked over, and gave Gabe the gun without extracting the shells. . . .

From around the corner a crescendo of noise erupted into Amanda Kirsting and her wide-eyed offspring. Amanda sighed when she saw little damage was done. Not so with the ten-year-olds. They had anticipated mayhem, and were visibly crestfallen that there was none.

The Parkinsons rode away, Pinkie staring straight ahead.

Amanda said nothing; no comment was necessary. Mary Ann still held the shotgun. Davey came and took it, and slipped an arm around her. She swayed against him, suddenly feeling trembling and shaken.

"I'd have killed him in another instant. I thought he was going to shoot Dad. Oh, Davey!"

Davey's arm tightened in understanding.

Dan Yancey stroked his chin, his glance on the boys. They had gone to squat beside Adolph, long familiar with him on their frequent visits.

"You scamps go saddle my horse. I'm going home with you for supper." He turned to Amanda then, a twinkle in his eyes. "Wait until I clean up a bit. A bride ain't got no business cooking her first meal for three. Besides, we've got to plan the party we're having here Saturday night to introduce the new bride. It's going to be the biggest ever."

He thought as he entered the house, that Davey was lucky to get a girl like Mary Ann. He'd break Davey's neck if he didn't treat her right.

SIDEWALK CATTLEMEN

TEXANS modestly admit that they are inventive cusses, that if Texas hasn't the largest of something it has the smallest—and that if they don't have it, they'll get it pronto.

Madisonville, Texas, claims to have the most unusual organization in these here United States—the Sidewalk Cattlemen's Ass'n with this significant motto: "Cowboy Boots for Cattle Owners Only."

There are four regulations and four penalties for violations: (1) Owner of at least two head of cattle—entitled to wear boots. Violation penalty: buy drinks for everybody in yelling distance, then take boots off. (2) Owner of three head—can stuff the right pants leg in. Penalty: buy drinks for everybody in sight, remove stuffed-in pants leg. (3) Owner of four head—can stuff both pants legs in. Penalty: suspension from wearing boots for two weeks, remove stuffed-in pants legs. (4) Owner of six head—can wear spurs. Yippee! Penalty: suspension from wearing boots for three weeks, and remove spurs.

Since 1940 the organization's annual barbecue has been celebrated as a legal holiday in Madison County. ——*Ferris Weddle*

"So you'll close the Gate, will you? Well, Ozzie'll stop that."

Killer Trails

By Myrtle Juliette Corey and Austin Corcoran

THE STORY SO FAR:

ADA KINGSLEY, fearing involvement in HENRY WINTHROP'S murder in New York, flees to Ute Springs. JOHN DOLAN befriends her there, and when he dies leaves her his interest in the Golden Gate. OSCAR LANT, slick co-owner, wants Ada to sell out to him.

An FBI man who trailed Ada from New York is murdered while searching her hotel room, but his body is unidentified. Ada, alone in the Golden Gate, is attacked and falls unconscious. BRANDY CRAIG, a cowboy, finds her and also Oscar Lant, knocked out by someone he failed to see. Ada goes to the hospital, and SHERIFF WEAVER, suspicious, decides to investigate Ada's background.

BEATTY, Winthrop's sinister friend, arrives in Ute Springs and by blackmail persuades Lant to help him kidnap Ada when Brandy takes her from the hospital to his ranch.

CONCLUSION

WHEN Ada descended the hospital steps, she saw the touring car, Bell House stenciled on its door, standing at the sidewalk. Pando was in the

driver's seat. As he had on her arrival at Ute Springs, he hopped out with a polite bow.

"Morning, miss," he said. "Angie sent me to pick you up."

"That was kind of her," Ada replied.

"Angie is always kind, even when it causes her trouble. And the Lord knows she's had plenty of that lately, with the sheriff running in and out disturbing her best guests."

Ada caught the little man's implication that this was her fault, and the deference in his manner contrasted oddly with the disapproval in his bright eyes.

Angie's greeting was casual. "Understand you're leaving us for a while," she said. "Well, there'll be a room for you when you come back."

Ada thanked her warmly.

"Promised Brandy Craig I'd look after you," Angie said. "I've known Brandy since he first set a saddle, which I guess was before he could walk. I'd hate to refuse him a favor."

There were errands to fill the balance of the morning, and Ada lost no time in starting for Ripley's office. The attorney approved her decision to close the Gate at once.

"I altered my opinion about making a deal with Oscar Lant. Had a talk with Weaver about him. Don't worry. I'll clean out that nest of crooks," Ripley said confidently. "Dolan could handle 'em, but with him gone, they're poison."

As Ada turned to leave, he said, "I suppose you know the body of the man who was killed at the hotel has finally been identified."

"No," she replied, the springiness suddenly going from her knees. It would be only a short time before everybody would know why the FBI man had come to Ute Springs, and why he had been searching Ada's room. "Who was he?" she managed to ask.

"I can't recall the name. In fact he appears to have been known under various names," the attorney said. "He has a bad record in the East, where he was associated with several underworld groups. He is known to have been a smuggler and to have handled stolen goods."

"Oh! Then he wasn't—" Ada began.

"Wasn't what?"

"Wasn't anybody from around this country," she finished lamely.

"No, indeed," Ripley said. "Bart talked long distance to the New York police, but I haven't all the details."

"He really was a crook then," Ada was still bewildered, scarcely aware of what she said.

"What else?" the lawyer asked drily.

After her first confusion, Ada felt relief. Then she wasn't close to discovery by the FBI. The false agent had trailed her, believing that she had the smuggled diamond and ruby bracelet. Perhaps Beatty, in turn, had trailed him. While it was alarming to know that she was the quarry of ruthless crooks, since she did not have the bracelet there must be a way to rid herself of their menace.

She discovered that she was a little less fearful of the law. If she could hold out just a little longer, without being discovered, something might even happen to Beatty.

WITH almost the last of her savings Ada bought a riding outfit. Tucking the parcel under her arm, she headed for the Golden Gate.

As on her first visit, the door was open, and the big, hairy-armed man was fussing around behind the bar. He greeted her with the same indifference he had displayed on her first visit, but she noticed that the slate-blue eyes now held a flickering glint.

"I'm going to the office for a moment," she explained.

He nodded silently and continued arranging bottles and glasses.

Stolid and unprepossessing as he was, Ada liked having his substantial bulk between herself and the open doorway into the street. It wasn't too pleasant to return to the spot where she had been surprised on her former visit alone.

She barely glanced into the money drawer, which now held only a thin layer of

currency. The Gate had been closed Sunday and no doubt Monday was a poor day, she thought, hurrying to open the metal door of the safe.

The small packets looked as she had left them. The robber had taken only the larger one from the top. Brandy's coming had scared him before he finished.

When she was putting the trinkets into her handbag, Ada noticed for the first time that one of the letters she had taken on Sunday afternoon was missing. She hadn't read them, but she remembered the blue envelope had an official look and thicker contents than the others. Perhaps it had slipped out of the bag at the hospital.

The bartender watched her coming toward him. "Couldn't I fix you something, miss?" he asked respectfully. "A nice, cold ginger ale or a limeade?"

"The lime sounds good. Yes, thank you."

She watched the deft moves of his thick fingers with interest. Neither spoke until he set the glass down, then he said, "John Dolan would have liked the way you talked up to Knowlson the other night. He wouldn't have that trash on his place. You've been gettin' a tough deal here an' Dolan'd hate that. He was a good boss, Honest John was." Pausing, the bartender bent his head and looked closely at the marks on her face, then glanced down at the soft scarf covering her bruised throat. "I know a nice girl when I see her," he went on haltingly, as if fumbling for words, "and it ain't right for no nice girl to be mauled like that. Any man that was in here when it happened should have done something."

"I don't think anybody was here, Mister—" Ada halted.

"Elmer's my name," the big man told her, "everybody calls me that. Listen, miss, I mix with tough guys, and I don't talk much. But they's some things I can't go. I got a room upstairs next door, and was settin' in my window when you stopped to chin with Paula. After you come on, she streaked it up the street she lives on. You come in here. I stuck my head out and watched you. 'Twarn't but a few minutes till Lant came hustling along and come in here. But I know there wasn't no other living soul came through that door between the time you did and him."

"Then Lant was inside when that man choked me!" Ada exclaimed. "Did you see *him* come?" she demanded.

"No." Elmer shook his head regretfully. "I went right out to get my supper and didn't see nothing more."

"Have you told the sheriff?"

He shook his head again, his eyes clouding. "He hasn't asked me any questions. See, miss, folks that's crooked can lie themselves outa tight jams lots of times. When you ain't asked anything, it ain't good to start talking on your own. Dunno who you'll get down on you that'll stick a bullet or a knife in you for revenge. But I've been turnin' things over in my mind." He looked again at the marks on Ada's face. Then he said, "It ain't right for no nice girl to be mauled like that. Anybody didn't interfere should be showed up. Listen, miss, the day Honest John was waylaid, him and one of the two guys in here, Syl or Lant, had a row. Whichever 'twas, Dolan was puttin' him out of the Gate. I heard just a few words through the office door. But Syl's wife was listenin' from the table way back there, and *she* knows."

"She wouldn't tell," Ada said.

"No, that female hyena wouldn't, unless the pinch was put on her pretty hard," Elmer admitted. "She's playin' with all she's got for Syl and Lant to get this place. Look out!" His voice dropped to a warning growl as Ada heard steps at the door.

SEEING Paula's reflection in the bar mirror, Ada lifted her glass and slowly swallowed the last of her limeade.

"Oh, here you are!" Paula cried shrilly. "So you're going to close the Gate, are you? Ozzie'll stop that! Speak up, Syl. Tell her where she gets off, firing you!"

Ada turned to give Paula a cold, level gaze. "Yes," she said, "I am closing the Golden Gate. If you want to discuss it, see Edwin Ripley."

Moving closer, Paula thrust her sharp chin at Ada. "I'll see the devil first!" she spat.

Elmer's arm lay across the bar, and the

big fingers worked as he watched Paula with suddenly keen eyes.

Picking up her parcel, Ada turned toward the doorway. Paula stepped in front of her. "No you don't! Not till I get through!" she cried, voice edged with fury.

"What's all this screaming about?" Lant demanded, appearing suddenly from the street.

Paula whirled and clutched his arm. "Syl and I ran into that lawyer, Ripley, and he says we're fired! I was just telling the lady boss that she isn't going to get away with that! You'll stop her closing down."

Lant looked at Ada. "Ripley called me to come up to his office. Is it about that?"

Ada hadn't liked Lant's manner, his too-soft brown eyes, but she hadn't dreamed those same eyes could look so ugly.

"Yes, it is," she replied bravely. "I've decided to close at once."

Paula declared. "She's ruining everything for us. We are doing fine till she blew in here and started her tricks. Are you going to let her get away with it?" Paula grabbed Lant with her other hand, jerking him around in the fury of her anger. "Are you going to let her walk on you?"

Lant's face bleached white, and his jaw muscles bulged. Ada could see ruthless determination growing within him under the lash of Paula's tongue and the heat of her fury. But he spoke with surprising restraint.

"I'll block that move," he said. "Don't think I won't."

"Talk it over with Ripley," Ada told him, brushing past the silent, sullen-faced Sylvester and going on through the outside door.

Sylvester was a coward. But Lant had a quality that made her think of Beatty. Under the skin, were they two of a kind? Elmer had implied that either Sylvester or Lant had killed Dolan. Could she rely on his word, or was he trying to double-cross his mates at the Golden Gate. But she wouldn't do anything about it until she talked with Brandy. At least she could be frank about the situation at the Gate.

When her suitcase was closed and small articles packed in the briefcase, she took the wrappings from the Molly jewelry. It was so lovely, Ada couldn't resist trying it on. Finally she wore the brooch at her throat and relied on the long sleeve of her blouse to cover the bracelet.

BRANDY arrived shortly after one o'clock, stowed her baggage in the car and they started at once. The two miles of highway rolled swiftly under the wheels while he told her something about the ranch and the people she would meet. They had turned into a smooth dirt road that wound off into low hills, and had gone a few hundred yards when he jammed on the brakes and brought the car to a halt.

A few feet in front of them a chunk of rock lay in the road. The high, pointed top of it couldn't be passed over by any car.

"Wonder who put that there!" Brandy exclaimed. "Look!" He pointed to a scar in the earth near the edge of the growth of young oaks that fringed the road on their right. "It came from over there."

Opening the door, he got out and started toward the rock. At his first step, two men moved into view from the shelter of the oak thicket. Only their eyes were visible through holes cut in the handkerchiefs that covered their faces. Each held a gun. That in the hand of the taller man was aimed at Brandy. The other was held on Ada.

"Stick 'em up!" the tall man ordered.

Ada gasped, staring at him with dilated eyes.

"Get out!" he commanded her. "Both of you stand over there!" He indicated a spot at the edge of the road.

"What's the idea?" Brandy demanded. "We have nothing of value."

"No?" The syllable was a sneer.

"No, we haven't," Ada declared. "But go ahead and see."

The shorter of the pair got into the car and tossed out Ada's baggage. Then he jumped behind the wheel, backed and turned with amazing speed. He drove away to a cluster of brush and trees, where he vanished from sight.

His moves had been made with a speed that gave Ada a breathless feeling, as if

she had been running. Brandy eyed the man with a fixed stare, his body taut as a tightened spring.

"Do whatever he says," he warned Ada in a low tone.

She nodded. She wasn't seeing the handkerchief over the tall man's face, but the ruthless, granite features with the straight mouth slit across them.

The shorter man came back on the run. Without a word he grabbed the baggage, leaped across a little gully paralleling the road on that side and started off between scattered trees on the left.

"Follow him!" came the order in the sinister, soft voice.

Ada gripped Brandy's hand with icy fingers. "Brandy, I've got something to tell you—"

"Quiet! No talk!"

Brandy's arm went encouragingly around her, drawing her closer to him as they walked. But it brought no warmth to her chilled body, nor ease to the terror rising within her.

They were following an almost obliterated roadway that wound between old cottonwood trees. It seemed a long time that they followed their guide, knowing the man with the gun was close on their heels, his weapon ready to fire at the least sign of trouble from either prisoner.

FINALLY a building loomed in front of them. Drab walls and the few small-paned windows, dim with dust, gave it a look of a great age. A wide entrance door was some distance from the ground, opening on a long platform that sagged toward its outer edge.

"The old mill," Brandy muttered.

Their guide led the way to a set of steps at one end, mounted these and went along the platform to disappear inside the doorway.

Ada could hear the ripple of steadily flowing water, and it added to the eerieness of the long unused building. They entered a long room, the corners of which were darkly shadowed in contrast to the space lighted from the doorway.

"Stand there!" A black-sleeved arm indicated a spot full in the light coming through the door.

"Take your mask off, Beatty," Ada ordered as they obeyed the command. "I know you, and I know what you want."

She felt the tremor that ran through Brandy as she spoke.

"Smart girl!" Beatty replied, left hand lifting to pull off the handkerchief that had covered his features.

Brandy stared, blinked, and stared again.

"You the man who robbed the safe!" he exclaimed, grimness tightening his jaw. "You're Yates, the lame man!"

"Yes," Beatty agreed with his mirthless grin.

"You lived at the Bell, across the hall from me!" Ada gasped.

"Yes. Handy spot," he replied. Then the grim mirth subsided as he ordered, "Okay, give it to me now."

Ada replied, "I never had that bracelet the newspapers told about."

She sensed Brandy's every impression, the surge of his changing emotions.

"I know you have it," Beatty insisted. "I saw Craig give it back to you in the hospital, after he got it from me in the Golden Gate. You put it under your pillow, just before you saw me at the window."

"Oh!" she gasped. "That wasn't the smuggled bracelet, It was this, and this," she touched the brooch, then lifted her wrist to display the bracelet on her arm.

"Don't think you can fool me like that," Beatty snarled. "I watched you take that package from your handbag and put it in the safe."

Ada exclaimed tensely, "I never even saw that bracelet. I couldn't have touched it. Winthrop didn't give it to me."

"Liar! Winthrop told me before he died, thought he was buying his life, that you were holding it for him. That was what took him to the office right after daylight that morning—to shake off anybody watching his place, and get it into your hands. He had it all fixed up, after the suspicion about him died down, he'd get in touch with you and get the bracelet." The words had come in a steady, monotonous stream

from Beatty's lips. "I know him. He was telling the truth."

"He didn't!" Ada's voice broke on a note of rising hysteria. "He only fired me."

"Ada," Brandy asked, "did he leave anything with you? What did you bring from that office?"

"Nothing," she insisted.

"Okay, do it the hard way," Beatty said. "You and your boy friend are playing a dangerous game. Twenty or thirty thousand dollars won't mean much when you're dead."

"Give it to me now!" the shorter man growled.

"Not yet," Beatty said.

"You promised." There was fear and ugliness in the growl.

"Not yet," Beatty repeated in the same tone.

The pressure of Brandy's arm, a fleeting glance, called attention to the terse argument. The pair weren't in complete agreement.

"Put the stuff here in front of me," Beatty ordered, "and turn out the briefcase first. That's right, I can watch you and them, too."

When the briefcase was empty, Beatty reached for it, thrusting a hand inside and exploring it thoroughly. Then he threw it down. It took longer to go through the contents of the suitcase, though there was a limited amount of clothing.

Brandy's tenseness held. Ada knew he didn't miss the least move of the other men, that he caught every inflection of Beatty's voice when he gave a brief order. Both the other men were armed, and Brandy had no weapon. Yet Ada felt growing within her a certainty that he would be able to do something.

When the last garment had been shaken out and examined, Beatty's mouth tightened.

"Search them!" he ordered.

THE SHORT MAN started toward her. Then a floor board rattled at the entrance. Beatty didn't move, but his masked companion whirled to face the doorway.

Just inside a man had halted. He was wearing a fawn-colored sports jacket, and a wicker creel was slung over one shoulder. In his left hand he carried a jointed fishing rod. A puzzled frown pulled his pale eyebrows together as he peered near-sightedly through the doorway at the group.

"What's going on?" he exclaimed.

The short, masked man who had started for Ada backed away. Suddenly he darted for the doorway. Beatty's gun muzzle shifted, then flashed back into position. The short man's hoarse yell mingled with the explosion of the shot as he crashed to the floor.

"You killed him!" Ada gasped.

"That's what the rest of you'll get if you try to make a break!" Beatty exclaimed. "You, there, throw down that rod and see if he's dead."

"That's Bly, a camper fellow from over by the Creek," Brandy murmured to Ada. "Why couldn't it have been Weaver?"

The pole dropped with a clatter as its owner stooped nervously over the fallen man.

"He's alive," Bly said, "but that shot went into his chest. I don't know, sir, if he can be saved."

"Hand me his gun, butt first, and no monkey business," Beatty ordered. "Now I'm going to put all of you in a nice, safe spot. A room that nobody can get into, nor any of you get out. You will stay in there for ten minutes. At the end of that time Ada Kingsley or Brandy Craig is going to tell me where that diamond and ruby bracelet is. Or else you will stay there."

"You can't get away with it," Brandy said coolly.

Twitching muscles in the hatchet face betrayed the growing strain on Beatty's nerves. He couldn't hold up much longer. He must break. But would he start by wildly shooting them down?

"I've got nothing to do with this business," Bly objected in an alarmed voice. "Let me go!"

Beatty laughed. "You butted in, you'll stay!"

As Bly turned with slumping shoulders

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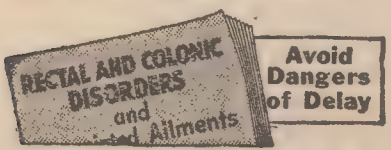

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and obvious fright, Brandy caught the mere flick of a glance. Bly's eyes weren't dull now, but as keen as polished steel.

"Now march for that door in the end of the room," Beatty said. As he took a step forward, his toe caught in the unfastened briefcase, almost tripping him. Stooping, he flung it aside with a force that pulled a handle loose at one end. Bright particles, like bits of crystalized sunlight, scattered over the wide, worn boards of the old floor.

"Got it!" Beatty's voice rose to a half yell as he glimpsed a brilliant dot go skipping past the motionless trio covered by his gun. "He took out the stones and packed 'em in that handle!"

"Oh! I should have guessed," Ada exclaimed. She gave Brandy a shocked look. "I didn't know," she said. "Brandy, I didn't!"

"I believe you," he said. "And I get the picture now. You see, I read the papers." His mouth twisted wryly. "Winthrop put that handle on your briefcase. He knew you wouldn't suspect. He didn't trust you—no crook would—and he was sure he could get the stuff back."

"Cut it!" Beatty snapped. Perspiration dripped down over his face, but his voice was steady. "March!" he commanded.

"Why? You've got the stones," Brandy said.

"Get into that room while I gather 'em up," Beatty said.

"He'll shoot us!" Ada murmured.

Brandy gripped her arm and turned her. "If you hear a shot," he whispered close to her ear, "keep on running."

SHE HEARD Bly stumble, seem to recover his footing with difficulty. He lurched against Brandy when he got to his feet, mumbling broken words. Brandy's body jerked. He gave Ada a strong push that forced her to run to keep from pitching on her face. There was a wild, high yell in Bly's voice, nerve-wracking after the taut, subdued voices of the preceding moments. Then came heavy thuds on the floor, groans and curses.

Ada turned when she could halt her plunging run. Brandy and Beatty were down, writing on the heavy planks, tearing savagely at each other. Brandy's left hand was locked around Beatty's gun wrist, his right clawing for a grip on Beatty's throat. Beatty's left fist hammered at Brandy's head.

Bly was scrambling to his feet, face streaked with blood and dirt, a red trickle moving from his sleeve down over his left hand. Ada saw with only a flicker of surprise that Bly was gripping a gun. And it wasn't the one taken from the short man who tried to escape.

The struggling men rolled over. Brandy was down. There was blood on his cheek, but he still held the gun wrist, bending it backwards. Beatty had jerked his throat free, but it cost him ground. Brandy's fist caught him with an uppercut that split the flesh on his jaw and knocked his head back. The gun dropped.

Springing forward, Ada grabbed for it. As she jumped back, Beatty landed a kick on her ankle that sent her sprawling. The gun slid across the floor.

When she turned, Brandy had his knees on Beatty's chest and both hands gripped his throat. Beatty's fists flailed feebly, then dropped.

The horrible thump of bodies against the plank floor, the thud of fists on flesh had stopped. Only the rasp of panting breath broke the stillness. For a moment Ada didn't even hear the steady rippling of the water.

"You got him!" Bly's voice broke in. "Let go. Better take him alive."

Releasing his grip with obvious reluctance, Brandy stood up slowly.

"Let him lie while we gather up these stones," Bly went on. "Guess there's a lot of them left in the stuffing of that handle, but plenty spread around on this floor."

"To hell with the stones!" Brandy rasped, turning to Ada.

"No, Brandy," Ada said firmly, "we've got to find every one of them. I have to send them straight to the New York Cus-

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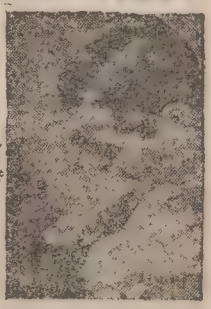

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toms Office. I brought them away, even if I didn't know it."

He brushed a hand across his eyes. "Yeah," he sighed, "guess that's so. Say, Bly, lend us a hand, will you?" He grinned wryly. "That was some surprise when I found your packed a gun in the side of that creel. When you pulled that wicker flap off as you stumbled, and I saw that steel muzzle, I knew we had a chance. That's why I tackled him."

BLY SMILED. "A weapon comes in handy," he said. "I usually pack one when I'm prowling around the country. And by all means, let's pick up the diamonds. The young lady is right. The diamonds and rubies from the bracelet belong to Uncle Sam. But I can save her the trouble of sending them in. And, I think, clear her of complicity in their theft."

"How?" Ada stammered.

"I'm a special agent of the Government, working with the customs people to recover this particular piece of smuggled goods. I heard about the other chap," Bly smiled faintly. "And now," he added, "I think we'll let Sheriff Weaver take a hand. I want Beatty, but I'll give him this other guy. Looks like he'll live to be hanged." Stooping over the wounded man who now moaned feebly, Bly lifted the masking handkerchief.

"Lant!" Brandy exclaimed.

"Weaver's about got him booked for the Dolan murder, only needs to fill in a few bits," Bly said. "Before I came out, to be on hand if Beatty held you folks up, the sheriff gathered in the Sylvester pair for questioning."

Going over to the doorway, Bly lifted his hand high. At once Ada heard the crunch of boots on the gravel along the platform.

"Thought you never'd signal me, damn you!" Weaver exploded as he swung up over the edge of the planks and appeared in the doorway.

"I had to be sure of enough evidence to clear my case," Bly replied. "We didn't know if Winthrop's secretary had the stuff or not, but the crooks believed she did. Most of the newspaper dope was put in to blind them. We had Beatty slated all the time, but we lacked evidence. He passed the bracelet from the jeweler, to Winthrop, to smuggle ashore. Then he tried to rob Winthrop. The other crook, the guy that Beatty stabbed at the Bell Hotel, got into the deal and tried to pull a fast one and get the bracelet for himself." Bly turned to Ada. "I believe your story, young lady," he said. "Lots of underworld women fake innocence, but not the brand you've got."

"How did you find me?" she asked. "The fake FBI man wouldn't tell me how he did."

Bly laughed. "Both those birds may have traced you the way I did. You left a sprinkling of clues. That note on your desk calendar caught my eye. Ute Springs seemed an odd spot for a New York typist to make a note of. It could be a place Winthrop had counted on meeting you. When you left the Portland route in Denver, that tied it.

"You've learned the hard way about killers," he said. "This Beatty's as bad as they come. What did you know about him before?"

"Not much," she replied. "He was fresh the first time he called at the office looking for Winthrop. I hated him right off. He came a time or two more and always made threats. Maybe he just enjoyed frightening me. I saw him hanging around my apartment house the day Winthrop was murdered, and that was what really scared me into running away. I was more afraid of him than I was of being suspected of being mixed in Winthrop's swindling deals. I'd only just learned about them."

Bly nodded. "If I need anything more," he said, "I'll look you up before I catch the plane east from Denver."

"I'll drive my car in close and pick up Lant," Weaver said. "Take you and Beatty in, too, and we can all pull out."

IT TOOK but a few minutes to gather up the scattered precious stones. Bly had the number supposed to have been in the famous bracelet which had once be-

longed to Italian royalty. The amount tallied. Ada was tying the stones securely in a linen handkerchief when they heard the hum of two approaching motors. Looking through the doorway, they saw Weaver's dusty sedan and the old touring car from the Bell House. Pando was at the wheel of the latter, Angie wedged beside him.

"She would come!" he squeaked through the window as he came to a halt.

"Quiet!" Angie ordered him. Opening the door, she oozed gingerly out to the ground. "You all right?" she demanded of Ada.

"Oh, yes!" Ada replied. She walked to the car and both arms went up around Angie's plump neck. "How did you happen to come?" she demanded.

"Scared about the new trouble you was in," Angie replied, puffing from the exertion from getting from the car. "Bart Weaver was boiling around the hotel, poking into Yates' room to make sure he wasn't in it, like he said he'd be, wanting to sleep the whole afternoon and not be disturbed." She halted to gulp in a breath, then went on, "Bart told me Yates was a murderer. If he managed to slip back I was to call his office and get his deputy. Then *he* phoned his office, and I listened. Found out he was heading for the ranch. Got to thinkin' and couldn't stand it. So I made Pando drive out, and we run into Bart over by the road, just now."

"Angie Bell, I love you," Ada exclaimed, laughing.

"Then lemme get my breath," Angie said, loosening Ada's arms. But her broad face was beaming. "Now let's go," she said, turning to frown at the others. "Next thing, Buzz Cady'll be on our necks. That guy's got a snub nose, but he uses it like a fox."

She insisted that Ada and Brandy ride back to the road in the touring car.

She glanced from one to the other, then straight at Ada. "I don't s'pose you'll be coming to stay much with me, but the room'll always be there—for both of you!" Her delighted laughter rang jubilantly on the still air.

"Thanks," Brandy said.

Ada clung to him as she smiled at Angie.

"We'll take you up on that, soon's we've been properly married."

Angie leaned back and braced herself as Pando tightened his grip of the wheel. Then the car started, and Ada and Brandy were left alone beside the tree-shaded road.

"They're all gone!" Ada exclaimed, surprised that she hadn't noticed the departure of the sheriff's car.

"About time," Brandy growled. "Get in my car now, and—"

"And go on to the ranch," Ada supplied.

"Nope, not yet," Brandy corrected her. "Not till you've been properly kissed and admit I'm your boss for the rest of your life. Promise me you'll never run away again."

"Of course," Ada said, lifting her face to his lips. "But if I hadn't run away that time," she said presently, "I'd never have found you."

(The End)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 29)

1. The skin, causing loss of hair.

2. Nevada.

3. Arizona.

4. To thin it by pulling out some of the hairs, usually the longest ones. Old-time bronc-busters sometimes did this to mark which horses had been ridden. Tails are also thinned for the sake of appearance.

5. Some by the states, some by the federal government, some by both in a cooperative agreement.

6. Yes, though now very rare, there were once a good many red wolves in the southwestern Border country.

7. Colorado River in Arizona.

8. Denver, Colorado.

9. A few of the many are: Silver City, N.M., Golden, Colo., Copper Hill, Ariz. Copperopolis, Calif., Irondale, Colo., Nugget, Wyo., Iron Creek, S.D., Gold Creek, Nev., Silverton, Colo., Copper Flat., Nev.; and in Spanish—Oroville, Calif., Orogrande, N.M., Cobre, Nev., La Plata and Fierro, N.M.

10. Pinto or paint.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

THERE ARE plenty of signs that rodeo in 1950 will stick to its unofficial slogan—Bigger and Better. Judging by the success of the big three which start off the season every year (Denver, Ft. Worth and Houston), rodeo cowboys, producers and sponsors have plenty of reasons to be optimistic.

All three of these early starters reported huge success. Houston chose the slogan, "Fabulous in '50," and nearly 50,000 people took their word for it, jamming the Coliseum to capacity for all but two of the 19 performances.

The opening parade was so long that the head of it had covered the 35-block route and was back at the Coliseum before the tail of it got started.

Headlined were Roy Rogers with Dale Evans, Gabby Hayes and the rest of his movie troupe. But even without the big names, cash customers would have had plenty to see. Three hundred and eleven of the country's best cowboys and cowgirls were entered, all trying to bring home a chunk of about $47,000 prize money and entry fees.

Plenty of them did—especially these finalists: Joe Vinas in bareback bronc-riding, Buddy Groff in calf-roping, Bill Linderman in saddle bronc-riding, Jim Eskew, Jr., in steer-wrestling, Harry Tompkins in bull-riding and La Tonne Sewalt in the girls' barrel race.

At Ft. Worth Gene Rambo showed the folks what made him the IRA All Around Cowboy in 1949. He won that title at the show and the saddle bronc- and calf-roping championships besides. Gene won so much of the $49,840 purse that he could probably just sit back and relax for the rest of 1950—but we have a hunch he won't. Already Gene has taken the lead in the IRA standings for this year, more than 500 points ahead of Bill Linderman and Jim Shoulders.

Gerald Roberts was runner up for the All Around title, and Eddie Akridge won bareback bronc-riding. Bill Linderman was the best steer-wrestler and Jim Shoulders (the RCA's champ for '49) was the top man with the Brahma bulls.

Gene didn't have an easy victory, particularly in saddle bronc-riding. Young Casey Tibbs was the man he had to beat. It was quite a story, and it began in 1949, when Casey lost the title when he was bucked off a horse named John Burns.

This year, after the third go-round, Gene had racked up 901 points, but Casey didn't exactly feel out of the running with his 900. With the fourth horse mastered by each of them, the score stood 1203 for Casey, 1191 for Gene, and one to go. Then in the finals Gene made a nice ride and Casey hit the dirt. And the horse that tossed him? You guessed it—John Burns!

That final go-round, incidentally, provided plenty of excitement besides. There were eight riders in it who had successfully ridden four horses apiece, and there were only 63 points between the top score and the bottom. The horses drawn included Verne Elliott's toughest—Ten Below, T. Joe and Squawman, for instance. And those horses really did their stuff, bucking off four of the eight finalists.

Verne Elliott also produced the Denver rodeo, where the titlists were Ray Kilgore in calf-roping, Gene Pruett in saddle bronc-riding, Joe Madden in steer-wrestling and Jim Shoulders in Brahma bull-riding. There was no final go-round in bareback bronc-riding, but winner of the second day money was Jake Monroe.

Besides the success of the three opening shows, there are other fine portents that the coming summer season will be a great one. The RCA is starting a big campaign to make the public aware that rodeo is a sport, not a show, that cowboys in the arena are not just exhibiting their skill but trying as hard to win as any basketball or baseball player. The RCA wants rodeo covered on the sports pages, so that the names of top-hands will be as familiar to sports fans as Joe DiMaggio, Ben Hogan or Joe Louis.

The Directors of the Ass'n say that most newspaper coverage of rodeo today is full of the names of local people who sponsor the show or of the rodeo queen and her court, which is fine on the front page or feature page, but the contestants and their riding and roping belong on the sports page.

With rodeo fast becoming a high school and college sport, more and more people are finding out that it's not just a Wild West show. Last year the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association held its first meeting in Denver, and over 30 students from 12 Western colleges and universities were on hand. The second NIRA championships will be held at San Francisco's Cow Palace, and we'll be reporting on it and on the organization in this department.

The high school students got themselves organized last year, too, under the leadership of Claude Mullins of Halletsville, Tex., where the first National Championship High School Rodeo was held. This year the second one is scheduled for Santa Rosa, N.M., in August.

The fourth State Championship will be held in Hallettsville, June 15, 16 and 17.

It used to be that youngsters who hadn't been brought up on a ranch had little chance to break into rodeo. But now with high schools and colleges taking up the sport, rodeo is sure to find more and better young top-hands entering the professional ranks.

WESTERN milestone: Levis are 100 years old. It was in 1850 that young Levi Strauss arrived in San Francisco to seek his fortune in the gold fields, but prudently bringing along a few bolts of cloth to sell in case he didn't hit pay dirt right away. He hit pay dirt all right, but without using a pick or a pan.

There was so much demand for his goods that he sent back East for more.

His career really got started, however, when he heard the cussing complaints of a Virginia City miner that his pants weren't tough enough. To Levi that was a challenge. He took the strongest cloth he could lay his hands on and stitched up a pair of pants and then added copper rivets at the seams. The miner was real pleased, just as generations of miners and cowboys have been since. Levi made a few changes in his original design before he was satisfied, but after that and for 75 years, levis haven't been altered in quality or style.

Around the circuit: Two more early and successful rodeos were held at El Paso, Tex., and Palm Springs, Calif. Canadian cowboy Carl Olsen proved to the spectators how tough a bronc-rider can be, when his horse tossed him and then dragged him around the arena. Fans held their breath until he got loose, and everyone was happily astonished to see him up and around a few days later. Winners at El Paso: Vern Castro, calf-roping; Homer Pettigrew, bulldogging; Clayton Hill, bull-riding; Wallace Brooks and Billy Myers tied in bareback bronc-riding; Bill Ward, saddle bronc-riding.

At Palm Springs Dan Poore took calf-roping; Lonnie Allen, bulldogging; Bill Muller, bull-riding; Carl Mendes and Lucky Buck split bareback; Lawson Fore and Buster Ivory split saddle bronc.

With cutting horse contests becoming more frequent events at rodeos, the West has another 1949 champ to cheer for. And this one's a lady, appropriately named Housekeeper, who won the most points at cutting horse contests last year.

Speaking of the ladies, the GRA is going great guns this year, too. More and more shows are introducing girls' rodeo events, and plans have been announced to open the Livingston, Mont., show on July 1 with a program of all girls' events.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

Plenty of Time

Dear Editor:

I wonder if it would be possible for a lonely Tennessean to get a letter published in Our Air Mail? I am 22 years old, have blue eyes and black hair. I'm 6'2" tall and weigh 190 lbs. I was in an accident, and it will be some time before I'll be able to walk again, so any mail would cheer me up a lot. I'll have something to occupy the time—answering your letters.

WILLIAM LEWIS

Route 2
Henry, Tenn.

Cow Gals and Boys

Dear Editor:

I am a young girl interested in corresponding with cowgirls and cowboys from ranches far and near, or anyone interested in horses. I'm 21 years old, 5'2", weigh 110 lbs. have blond hair and blue eyes. I own my own horse, though I live in the city, and I ride every weekend. I'll be happy if you buckaroos will get busy with your pens and drop me a line.

MILDRED HANSEN

76 Woodrow St.
Daly City, Calif.

She's Succeeded

Dear Editor:

For a long time I've wanted to get a letter printed, and I hope that this time I succeed. I am a Texas girl, 18 years old, with dark brown hair and eyes. I want to hear from everybody, especially people from the Eastern and Southern states. I promise to answer every letter I receive, so give me lots of work to do.

JOYCE CHAMPION

Box 584
Cross Plains, Tex.

She Has Help

Dear Editor:

Please print my request for pen pals real soon, won't you? I'd like to hear from folks everywhere, but especially from the Western and Southern states. I'm in my early thirties, brown hair, blue eyes and I stand 5' 5" tall. I'll try my best to answer all letters, but if I can't I have two girl friends who will help. So please write, boys and girls, and just about everyone.

VIRGINIA LEE GIBBS

Gen. Delivery
Lexington, Ky.

Flower Girl

Dear Editor:

I am writing to plead for pen pals. I am 41 years old, stand 5' 5" and have brown hair and blue eyes. I love cooking and working with flowers. I am the only one at home with my parents and I don't have much time to go out. So please, everybody, write to me and I promise to answer you.

LUCILLE HOGUE

Route 3
Baldwyn, Miss.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 25 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Stamp Man

Dear Editor:

For a long time I've wanted to write to Our Air Mail for pen pals. I'd like to have friends from all over the States, and from foreign countries too. I'm hoping that you will print this plea real soon. I want to exchange stamps with anyone anywhere.

RONNIE HOLSCHER

Windemere Village
Lee's Summit, Mo.

A Hobby

Dear Editor:

I make a hobby of pen pals so I thought I would write for your help. I am 5' 5", weigh 110 lbs. I have brown hair and eyes. I like skating, swimming, and dancing. I like to hear from anyone, and will do my best to answer as many letters as I have time for, as I work in the evenings. So please write if only a few lines, girls and boys.

MARY DARELENE LEWIS

Box 203
Virgil, Kans.

Senior Sport Fan

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to have my plea for pen pals published in Our Air Mail. I am a senior in high school. I like all sports, especially football. I would like to hear from boys and gals all over the nation. I am 6' 3", have blue eyes and dark wavy auburn hair and I am 19 years old. I promise to answer all letters I receive. I hope a few will write to me. I will exchange snaps.

BOB McKINNEY

Route 1, Box 49
Knox City, Tex.

OUR AIR MAIL

Mail for Mother

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for pen pals. I'm a middle-aged mother of four children, all of school age. I love to write and receive mail. I would like to exchange scenery folders, postcards, pictures, and anything of interest. I am 5'8", weigh 150 lbs., and have blue eyes and auburn hair. We live on a 90-acre farm, and we all love country life. I promise to answer all letters that I receive. I would like to hear from people of all ages.

NORA BRADFORD

Route 1, Box 79-A
Centuria, Wisc.

Second Time

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get into your Air Mail column, and I hope that this time I will be successful. I am 20 years old, and have brown hair and eyes. I would like to hear from everyone, everywhere, but especially from people between the ages of 18 and 27. I like writing letters, reading, the movies, and dancing. Please, guys and gals, drop me a line. I'll do my best to answer all letters.

EILEEN JAACKS

1410 E. Broadway
Denison, Ia.

Roaming Days Are Over

Dear Editor:

Any room for a former roamer? I've hitchhiked over 5,000 miles, and worked up until four years ago. I don't get around so much any more. I'm 42, and since my children are all married I get lonesome sometimes. I'm a dreamer, love reading and music, and my hobby is collecting rocks from everywhere. Come on, pen pals, write to me.

MRS. ADA GRAY

Route 1, Box 67
Corcoran, Calif.

Don't Let Her Down

Dear Editor:

Do you think you can help me find a few pen pals? I love to write but I never seem to have anyone to write to. I am 20 years old, have dark brown hair and grey eyes. I weigh 145 lbs. and stand 5' 9" tall. I will exchange pictures and answer all letters I receive. Don't let me down, please.

JEANNINE HOUGH

RD 3, Box 275
Latrobe, Penna.

Happy?

Dear Editor:

How about letting me take a crack at getting some pen pals. This is the third time I have tried to crash the gate. I am 18 years old, have dark blonde hair and hazel eyes. I am also 5' 6½" tall. I promise to answer all letters and exchange pictures. So, all you guys and gals, how about making this gal happy?

LOUISE BURKHART

Route 4
Ringgold, Penna.

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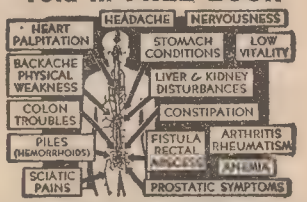

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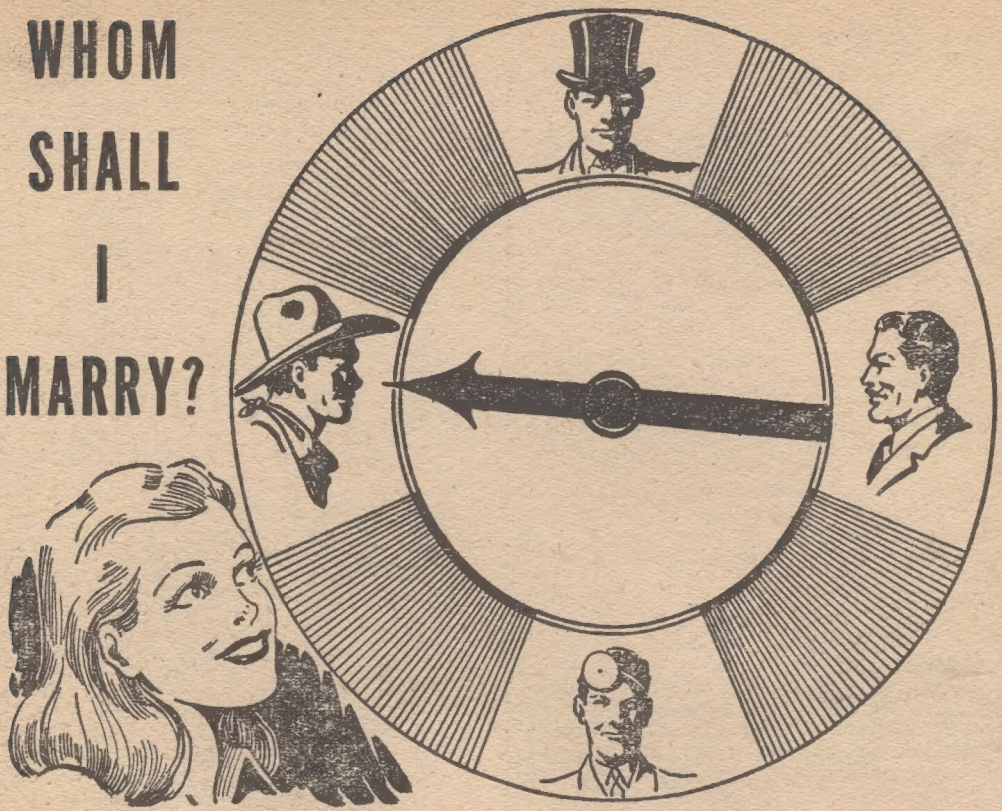
WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

Girl of Gemini

May 21 to June 21

ALEXIS SMITH, Dorothy Maguire, Rise Stevens, Paulette Goddard, and Rosalind Russell were all born under the third zodiacal sign.

Gemini girls are gay, seldom fretful or worried. They have little caution, but rush headlong into life, fearing nothing and giving their full forceful charm to all the world. Naturally they are loved by all.

Inclined to light-hearted flirtatiousness, they sometimes find themselves taken seriously. But the Gemini girl has a fine way of swimming in and out of hot water. She is used to many romances by the time she is twenty. Often she doesn't settle down until her thirties.

Her mate must give her more than love. He must provide her with mental stimulation. He should be versatile and be able to follow her many moods easily. She has little patience with stuffy folk who believe that the world should stand still. She is lively and lovable and should marry a man who likes these qualities rather than one who is annoyed by them.

With her work, as with her heart, the Gemini girl can happily flirt from one interest to another. She's clever and full of charm, and people love her wherever she finds herself.

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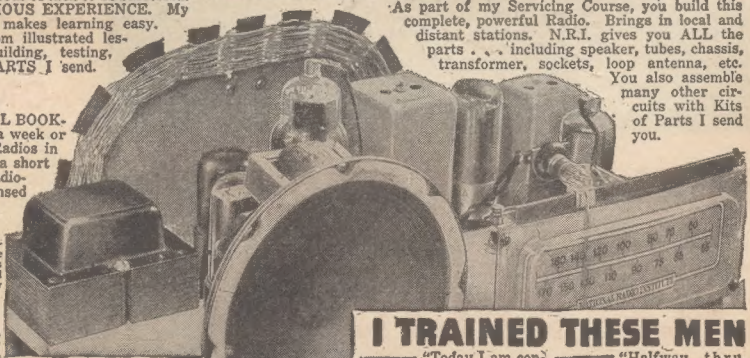

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Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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